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VERDUN

— Marshal Pétain —

VERDUN

BY

HENRI PHILIPPE PÉTAIN

Marshal of France
Member of the French Academy

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION
BY
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LINCOLN MAC VEAGH
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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION, AND THE BEGINNING OF THE BATTLE

I

Introduction

ON February 21st, 1916, a hurricane of iron and steel broke over the defences of Verdun. The Germans attacked with a force and violence never before equalled. The French accepted the challenge, for Verdun to them is even more than a great fortress, an outpost intended to bar the path of the invader on the east; it is the moral bulwark of France. The German onrush at first overwhelmed all our advanced positions, but we quickly found our feet, and from that time on we held in check by our unaided strength the formidable attacks that the Germans launched unremittingly for five months. Thus the Verdun region became the scene of a terrific duel between the two chief adversaries on the western front.

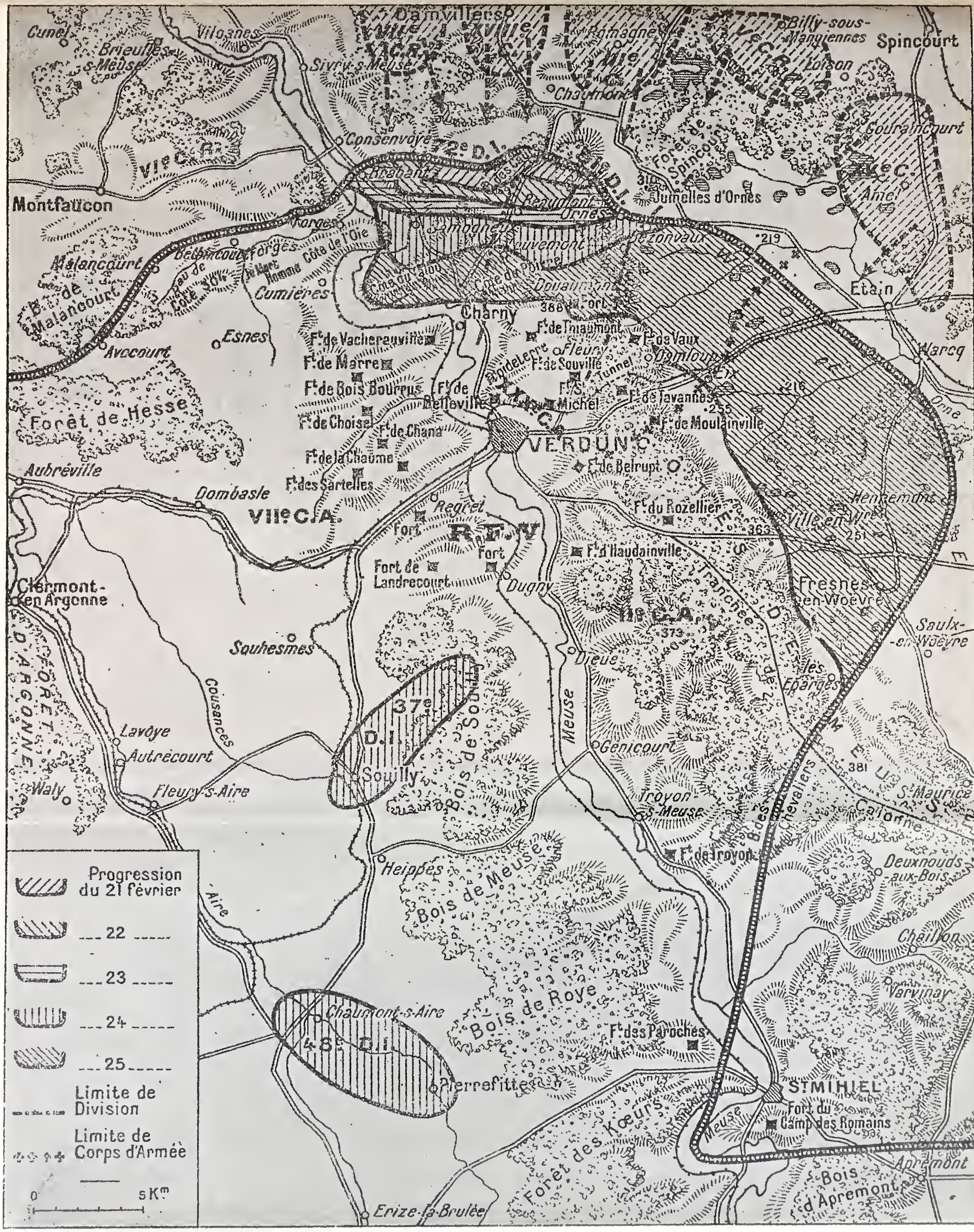
The memory of these events is fraught with deep emotion to the men whose shoulders bore most of the responsibility for their direction. When General Pershing visited Douaumont, on September 21st of

last year, he addressed me in profoundly sympathetic words, which betray in striking fashion his realization of this fact:

"The poignant horror of the tragedy enacted here has been brought home to me anew, and my triumphant sense of victory has been entirely overwhelmed by my sympathy for the men who fell, the victims of the sacrifice. Their patience and courage, their unalterable will to follow to the end the long and dolorous road of martyrdom which they were treading, have been celebrated in words more appropriate than any I could utter. But the grief of the man who commanded them has been too often forgotten by all who have commented on these battles. I have often felt, when you and I were together, that I could read your thoughts and follow your mind as it reviewed the days and weeks of your struggles on this soil, when your country's fate hung in the balance. Only those who know the kindness of your heart can appreciate the weight of sorrow which it carried. The fall of each one of your soldiers was a stab in the heart of his general, and the impassive expression under which you hide your feelings masked constant and unremitting grief.

"As an old friend and comrade in arms . . . I feel my thoughts dwelling on those who did not return, and like you, I think of them with infinite sympathy."

These are among the truest and finest words that have been said on the subject of Verdun.



-- The German Attack of February 21st, 1916 --

Showing the German Progress up to February 25th, Inclusive

II

General Situation of the Nations at War, at the Close of 1915

BEFORE proceeding to an explanation of the plans of our High Command at the beginning of the winter 1915–1916, let us consider the general situation of the forces engaged on both sides.

The historical section of the French staff, relying on figures compiled with the most scrupulous care, reports that at the end of 1915 the two sides were of approximately equal strength, with about six million men enrolled in the armies of each coalition. Numbers of men were available in reserve behind the lines, particularly in Germany, Russia, and England. The strength of Austria and of France had been seriously depleted by the first year of fighting. Italy and Turkey could draw on barely enough effectives to feed their front lines. Serbia was temporarily out of the running.

The special points to be considered in regard to any

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possible break of the deadlock at the beginning of 1916 were the number of men in the reserve depots, and the available quantities of military stores. Germany unquestionably had the advantage here, with about one million five hundred thousand trained men behind the lines, and with her factories working to their full capacity, thanks to the wisdom with which she had long since arranged for mobilization. France, England, and Russia were quite incapable of regaining equality with her. In Russia, much remained to do to improve the organization of the troops and to complete their equipment. The English had postponed until January 27th, 1916, the passage of the Military Service Act, making military service compulsory for all unmarried men, and several months would be needed for the distribution of the products of the various war industries. France was suffering from the heavy drain on her man-power of the fifteen months during which she had borne most of the burden of the fighting on the western front; she was inadequately equipped on account of delays and difficulties in her industrial mobilization; and moreover, she had had to provide arms and munitions for certain of her allies. For these reasons, she was definitely inferior to Germany.

We realized that the Germans would make a

prompt effort to make the best of their advantage, but the question was where they would strike.

An attack on the eastern front was not to be expected. True, the Russians had offered a tempting prey ever since their retreat to the Riga line, but time and distance would always work in their favor. They could be counted on to repeat the strategy that had served them so well in 1812, retreating to avoid any decisive conflict, only to threaten the communications of their assailants.

In the southeast, there was no important objective to be gained. Serbia had retired from the field for the time being. Rumania and Greece had hitherto shown no hostility to the Central Powers, and the Franco-British army was undecided as to whether to concentrate its strength at the Dardanelles, at Saloniki, or in Egypt.

As for the south, the Germans would be unwilling to hamper their efforts again by collaboration with the Austro-Hungarian army, already so cumbersome, and now quite profitably occupied in confining Italy to a theatre of action considered of secondary importance for the moment.

The west—undoubtedly it was there that the Germans would strike. In so doing, they would give the French no opportunity to recover from their terrible

losses early in the war. The High Command of the enemy would attempt to crush us by violent offensives on our front, and at the same time would undermine the strength of both the British Empire and France by intensive submarine warfare on a grand scale. In pursuing this double aim, their two objectives would be, comparatively speaking, near together: Paris, at the heart of France, and the naval bases in the Pas de Calais, along the line where the English and the French forces joined hands.

The great allies of the west, therefore, expecting an attack in 1916, focussed their attention chiefly on the lines of communication in Flanders and in the region of Paris, and it was near these communications that they tended to maintain the center of gravity of their forces.

III

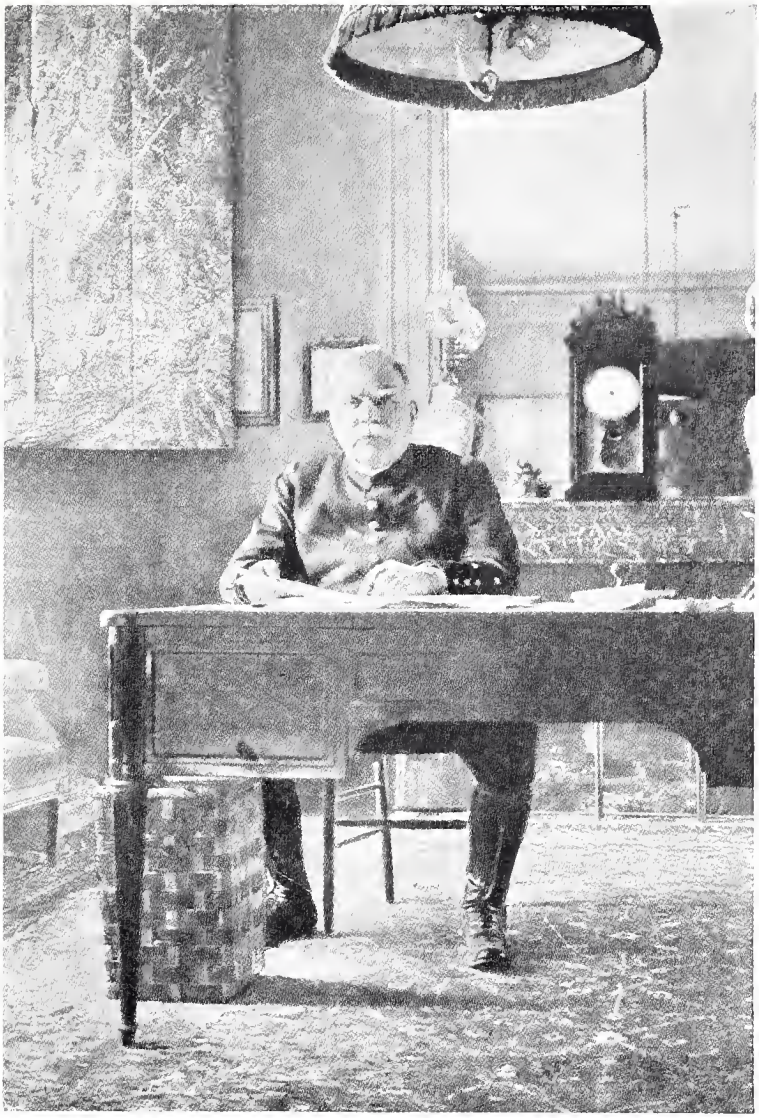
Detailed Exposition of the Situation on the Western Front. Plans of the French and their Allies at the Beginning of the Winter of 1915–1916

THE Allies had no intention of being left to the mercy of circumstances. Foreseeing that they would be attacked, they sought to take the offensive into their own hands. Whether or not they actually could do so was a problem, in view of the facts already stated. Indeed, if we proceed to a detailed examination of the situation as it stood on the western front, we shall be surprised that General Joffre could have nursed the hope of retaining the initiative.

Between the North Sea and the Swiss frontier the front was practically divided into two sectors of sharply distinct character. Some appreciation of their nature is essential, for no one can understand the battle of Verdun who does not realize the difficulties under which the French army labored at the opening of the year 1916. The Anglo-Belgian sector, between

Nieuport and the western skirts of Péronne, on the Somme, about one hundred and eighty kilometers in extent, was manned by thirty-nine British and six Belgian divisions. The Germans faced these forty-five divisions, echeloned in depth, with a total force of only thirty divisions, and possible reënforcements of two divisions, kept in close reserve. Our allies, however, considered that their numerical superiority was not a sufficient guarantee of safety. They felt that they were not yet well enough organized, equipped, and trained to withstand with confidence attacks like those at Ypres or on the Yser. Consequently, we had to reënforce this sector strongly, and to keep a relatively large number of French units in it, to wit, four divisions, two of them in the line, in the Belgian zone, and fourteen divisions, nine of them in the line, in the British zone.

The mass of the French army, eighty-seven divisions, was stationed between the Somme and Switzerland. Its mission was threefold: to safeguard the immense French sector, more than five hundred kilometers in length; to keep itself in readiness to reënforce the Anglo-Belgian sector in case of need; and to seize every possible opportunity to redeem any part of the occupied territories in France and Belgium. The multiplicity and complexity of our tasks required



~ General Joffre ~

Commander-in-chief of the French Army, in 1915

that a large number of units be kept in general reserve, ready at a moment's notice to move by bus or by rail. But the outline of the front made our communications, by exterior and enveloping lines, always longer than those of the Germans, who communicated by interior lines, and it was necessary to overcome this disadvantage by ensuring the rapidity of our movements. For these reasons the General Staff held in strategic reserve behind the French sector, at the end of 1915, twenty-nine divisions, and could assign only fifty-eight to hold the line from the Somme to Switzerland.

The Germans would be able to keep an equivalent number of divisions in the corresponding opposite sector, that is, eighty-seven, of which seven or eight were then on their way from the eastern to the western front. But their easy means of communication made it unnecessary for them to keep a large number of units in general reserve, as we did. They limited such reserves to about seventeen divisions, and held seventy divisions in line against the fifty-eight French divisions. For this reason we constantly lost the local actions that the enemy kept initiating against us.

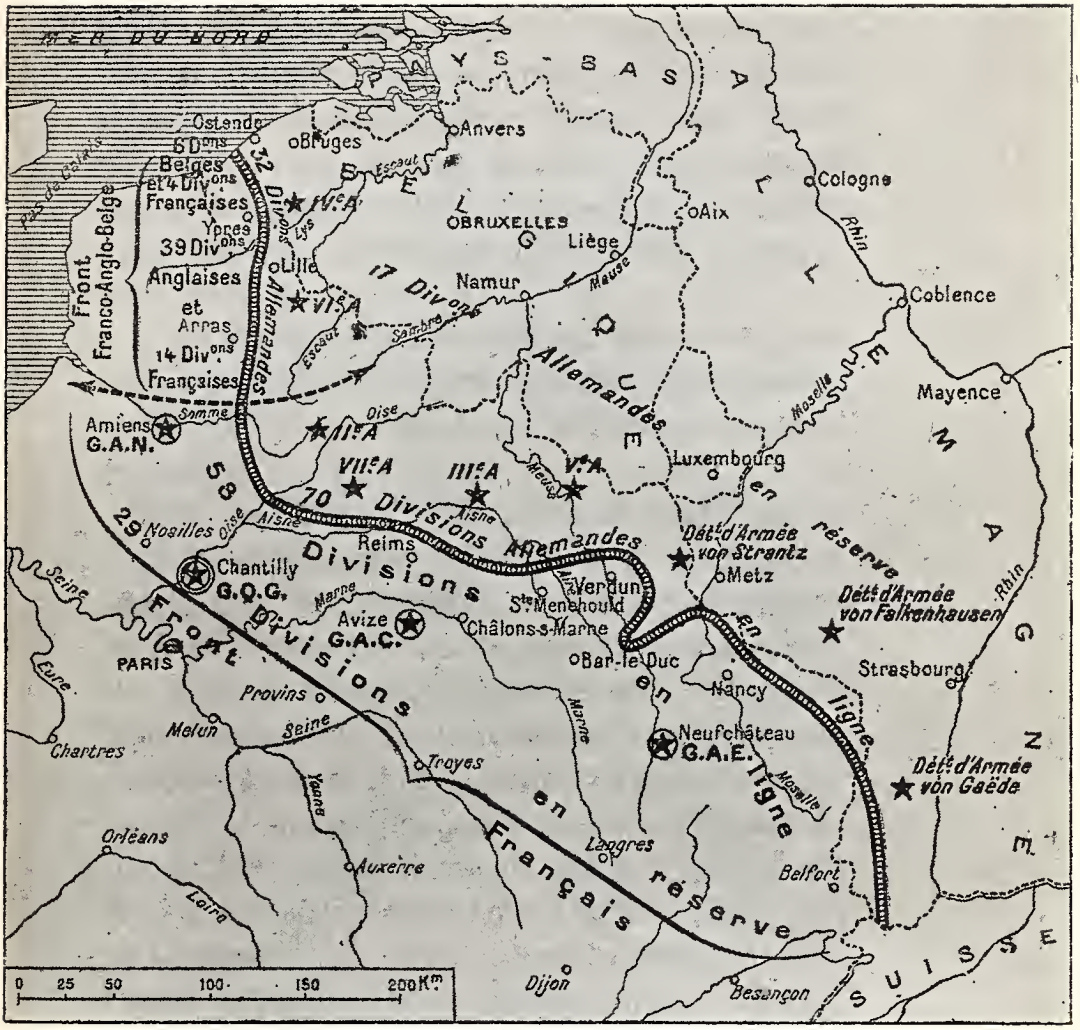
It must be remembered, moreover, that the superiority of the German artillery over our own was so great that it may well be called overwhelming. They

had innumerable rapid-fire guns, both heavy and extra-heavy, and were abundantly supplied with shells and poisonous gas shells. For heavy artillery, we had only a number of Rimailho batteries, and the old Bange cannon taken out of our forts, inadequately supplied with ammunition. Modern guns were just beginning to come from Saint-Chamond and Creusot; and our chemical warfare factories, which had been late in getting under way, were not supplying us with the means to fight on equal terms, as far as the various gases were concerned.

In spite of all these facts, General Joffre adopted a plan of operations for 1916 in which offensive actions had the major part. On December 6th, 1915, his memorandum was read by his Chief of Staff, General Pellé, to the Allied Commanders-in-Chief, assembled at Chantilly. Field Marshal French and Generals Robertson and Murray represented England; General Wielemans, Belgium; General Porro, Italy; General Gilinsky, Russia; Colonel Stephanovitch, Serbia. The essential points of the plan were as follows:

1. On the defence: Each army would take measures to check enemy attacks and to give all possible assistance to any other Allied army that might be seriously threatened.

2. On the offense: The Allies, particularly those



The Western Front, at the Beginning of 1916

who had considerable supplies of men, would seek to wear down the enemy in limited and local actions, intensively carried out; then, together, they would prepare to work out, with all their resources and as soon as possible, plans for general actions, convergent in direction and simultaneously executed, aiming at a decision.

3. On the minor fronts: Gallipoli would be evacuated; Egypt would be held with the fewest possible units, and the inter-Allied front of Saloniki would be organized.

Some discussion ensued, activated chiefly by the English, who wanted more powerful defences for Egypt, and were unwilling to involve themselves north of Saloniki, but in the end the memorandum was adopted. Between December 20th, 1915, and January 9th, 1916, the Dardanelles were evacuated. Preparations were made to assure General Sarrail at Saloniki of an expeditionary force of four French divisions, five British divisions, and six reorganized Serbian divisions. General Sir Douglas Haig, who on December 19th, 1915, superseded Field Marshal French at the head of the British armies in France, entered into close relations with General Joffre, with the object of preparing a great Franco-British offensive in the Somme region. General Foch, commanding the

northern group of our armies, was given orders to arrange for the French share in this offensive, and I, with the Second Army, was put at his disposition.

During January and February, 1916, in spite of gathering evidence as to the probability of a German attack, the military chiefs worked to make the decisions of Chantilly practicable "all the same." The French High Council for National Defence met in Paris on February 8th and took under consideration the agreements that those chiefs had made. The latter planned to allow Russia and England to finish first the reorganization and preparation of their troops. They therefore did not expect the combined operations of the Allied armies to begin before early summer. They had agreed that if the enemy struck at one of the Allies before that time, the other Allies would attack whatever enemy forces lay opposed to them, in order to retain them in place and to wear them down. Thus each would contribute a share to the battle.

IV

Evidence of a Projected Attack on Verdun. Holding to the French Plan

DURING the last part of December, 1915, and the beginning of January, 1916, our intelligence service reported many rumors, vague and contradictory for the most part, concerning the possibility of a German offensive on the western front. From these rumors it concluded that the specially threatened points were, on the one hand, the northern part of the Franco-British sector, and on the other, the center and right of the French sector—Champagne, Verdun, Lorraine, or Belfort. In other words, the various pieces of evidence nullified each other, since they involved our whole line of positions! But towards the end of January, we noted troop movements of considerable importance in the directions of Montmédy, Longuyon, and Audun-le-Roman, and great activity on the Meuse railroads. Thus our attention was particularly drawn to Verdun, which formed a marked salient in

our line, and was therefore a weak spot which might well be the objective of a local attack by the enemy. Before long, we obtained more exact information, and numerous letters taken from prisoners spoke of the approaching early appearance of the Crown Prince in the field, of a review that the Kaiser would hold at the end of February in the Place d'Armes in Verdun, and of the peace that would follow. General Herr, in command of the fortified zone of Verdun, reported and confirmed these rumors. Supported by General de Langle de Cary, in command of the Central Army Group, he urgently requested reënforcements, both to hold his front line and to improve the consolidation of his defensive positions.

The important part played by Verdun throughout our long series of wars with the Germans is a matter of common knowledge. In 1914, in fact, it had served as the pivot for the manœuver that won the battle of the Marne. Since then the entrenched camp had been the object of no attention from the enemy. In fact, it seemed as if there were less military activity thereabouts in 1915 than in time of peace. The Meuse, with its lazy meadows, frequently flooded in winter, formed the bottom of a central basin enclosed by the heights of La Chaume, Saint-Michel, Souville, and Belrupt. On its outskirts rose the forts of Marre and

— General de Langle de Cary —

Commander in February, 1916, of the French Army Group of the Center

Vacherauville on the left bank, and of Douaumont, Vaux, and Tavannes on the right; silent, and to all appearances deserted. The fort of Douaumont rose above them all with its huge mass. Here was the keystone of the system, though it did not appear that all the measures necessary to insure its safety had been taken. Between the forts and beyond them there was nothing but desolation; innumerable trenches, many of which had fallen in, and broken barbed wire entanglements, covering with an impenetrable labyrinth the ragged woods of the Côtes-de-Meuse and the muddy flats of the Woëvre. Roads and by-ways were boggy with shell-holes; scattered dumps lay all about, where wood rotted and metals rusted in the rain. Here the war dragged wearily on, no sounds breaking the silence except occasional explosions of grenades, bombs, or shells, whose echoes failed to disturb the invisible troops below.

It was the calm before the storm.

However, our General Staff did not turn a deaf ear to the appeal of the local commanders and, with the opening of the year 1916, sent some of its available forces to the stronghold. But it did not have resources enough to be able to divert to the fortified zone the effectives, either laborers or combatants, which it needed to keep in instant reserve against an immi-

nent attack of unknown purpose. If the Germans were planning an assault on Verdun, doubtless the town would not be their only objective, and their blows would be quite as likely to fall against the left as against the right of our line. They had been very clever in spreading false rumors concerning their movements, and had so thoroughly disguised the preparations for their offensive that actually we were in the deepest uncertainty in regard to it.

Between February 8th and 16th, as a matter of fact, our reports were so contradictory that the High Command began to wonder whether the German activity might not after all declare itself on the eastern front rather than on the western. General Joffre, writing to Sir Douglas Haig on February 10th, concerning the projected Franco-British operations on the Somme, outlined the conditions for developing these operations "according to whether the Allies keep the initiative in operations until next summer, or whether the enemy makes a powerful attack against the Russians in the spring." On February 18th he added that "if the Germans get ahead of us by striking at the Russians, our assistance to the latter would take the form of the offensive, carried on by the French and British on the Somme, as if they still had the initiative."

Consequently our Generalissimo continued to keep his armies drawn up in the general formation that he conceived to fit the situation, that is, with their axis of movement chiefly behind his center and his left wing. Thus he was able to push his preparations for the offensive and at the same time stand ready to meet the possible attacks of the enemy that he considered most dangerous, namely, any direct attempt on Paris or on the naval bases of the Pas de Calais. He kept his eye, however, on the other threatened sectors, particularly the fortified region of Verdun, which he reënforced with two divisions, and within reach of which he kept two of his best army corps, the Seventh and the Twentieth.

V

The Plan of the German High Command

DURING these same months, December and January, General von Falkenhayn decided upon the assault on Verdun, proceeded to plan it, and directed the army of the Crown Prince to prepare for it. He has given us a detailed account of his intentions and his aims, representing both as very modest, in his book entitled *The German General Staff and Its Decisions, 1914–1916.*[1]

The general trend of his argument is as follows: It was necessary to strike a strong blow on the western front, because England could be seriously weakened elsewhere, and England, rich in resources of every kind and little affected up to that time by the strain of the war, was the most formidable of Germany's enemies. A relentless submarine campaign would weaken England, but Berlin was at first opposed to this course from fear of the neutral nations,

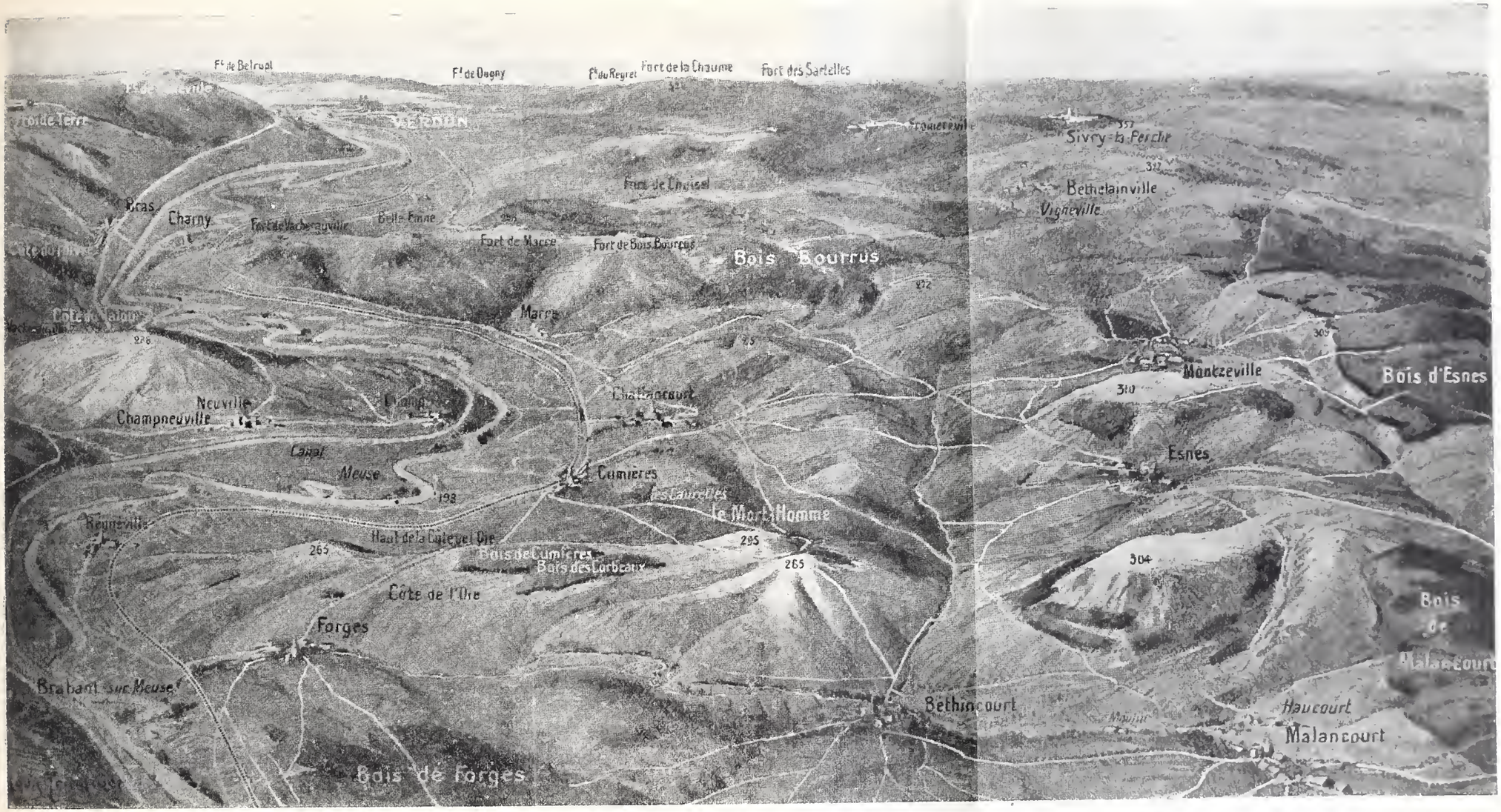
[1] New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1920.

particularly of the United States. It was inadvisable to attempt a major operation in winter against the continental sector held by English troops, on account of the serious disadvantages imposed by the climate and the nature of the terrain. But the mainstay of the English army could be broken and its strength greatly lessened by the destruction of the French army, whose resistance seemed on the point of breaking, after fifteen months of losses and exhaustion.

To accomplish this object, there was no necessity of aiming at distant objectives of first-class importance, like Paris. It would be enough to force a battle in a sector that France would defend at all costs, on psychological grounds. Belfort and Verdun answered these requirements, for the pride of the French nation would be touched and Frenchmen would shed their last drop of blood rather than lose these forts, felt by them to be flesh of their flesh. Taken all in all, Verdun was the most promising objective, because of the conditions, highly favorable in many respects to the movements, both strategic and tactical, to be made in drawing up an attacking force. The French salient, itself poor in communications, was surrounded on the German side by a rich network of roads and railways, permitting the rapid concentration of attacking forces. Moreover, the wide belt of ravines and woods

that encircles it would be of great assistance in disguising the necessary measures to complete the preparations. The Germans could even do without winning the battle or reaching the heart of the fortified area, since the French army would let itself be "bled white" in its defence, and thus would sink into exhaustion. In short, the plan was to mass great strength in matériel rather than in men, using this matériel to drain the force of the opposing army without great expense in effectives. A point at which to come to grips would be chosen on the right bank of the Meuse, within reach of the best communications between the German front and rear lines. There the enemy would strike, and go on striking as long as necessary to fulfill the purpose of the battle, the attrition of the French army.

Another prime consideration, in the eyes of Falkenhayn, justified the choice of Verdun. The capture of the stronghold would remove the constant threat that we held over the main communications of the Germans and the smelting and refining basin of Briey. I shall have more to say about this argument, which is the weakest of all those mustered to his support as afterthoughts by the Chief of the General Staff, and which shows a complete misunderstanding of our possibilities.



— Panorama Showing the Front on the Left Bank of the Meuse, Taken from the German Side Looking Toward Verdun —

Contrary to the ideas expressed by Falkenhayn, the Crown Prince, to whom was entrusted the preparation and the execution of the operations against Verdun, did not assent to this plan of limited scope. *The Memoirs of the Crown Prince of Germany* [1] inform us of the fact. According to his way of thinking, the German army must not again fail to capture Verdun, and the city must fall. Its capture could be accomplished by repeating, with greater persistence and more force, the manœuver of 1914, that is, an enveloping movement to close in on the entrenched camp on both banks of the Meuse, getting such a stranglehold on the rear positions that the front positions would of necessity be rendered untenable. There could be no second battle of the Marne to force a miscarriage of this operation. It had an excellent chance of success, for southeast of the town, the Germans already had gained a foothold on the Heights of the Meuse, at Saint-Mihiel, and on the left bank of the Meuse, opposite that town.

General von Mudra, in command of the Sixteenth Corps in the Argonne under the Crown Prince, had long been studying the principles of this problem. He had been in command at Metz before the war; in early September, 1914, he had been connected with

[1] New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922.

the Fifth Army while it manœuvered with intent to invest the fort from the west, and he knew better than anyone the inestimable value of the positions of the left bank, as well for the defence of the entrenched camp as for an attack upon it. He was in hearty agreement, according to statements he made in a number of interviews, with the opinions of his chief, and he believed that any German advance towards the south, between the Meuse and the Argonne, would irreparably endanger our situation.

The Crown Prince and General von Mudra were perfectly right. Because of our scanty communications in that sector, we could not have held on the right bank if the German Fifth Army had succeeded in reaching the Sainte-Menehould–Aubreville–Verdun railroad, thus threatening from close quarters the main route from Bar-le-Duc to Verdun. We should have been forced to retreat hurriedly to an improvised line between the Argonne and Saint-Mihiel, and such a retreat, with the immediate abandonment of Verdun which it would involve, would have had very serious consequences for our morale. For it was not generally known at the time that Verdun no longer counted as an entrenched camp, and the abandonment of our efforts to defend the beleaguered city would have been interpreted as a sign of our rout.

What must we think of these *a posteriori* considerations of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff? In the first place, the Germans had certainly no intention of attacking Verdun on the ground that Verdun in any way threatened them. Verdun, a salient beyond our lines, Verdun, without communications, Verdun, straddling a river without adequately assured means of passage from one bank to the other—Verdun could not possibly be considered a base for offensive operations. An army had nothing to gain in attacking from a salient. Hindenburg and Ludendorff were to discover this truth in 1918, at Amiens and at Château-Thierry.

In the second place, to "bleed" the French army was not at that time a plausible and adequate object. If he tried only to exhaust us by striking at us in a place so sensitive that we should defend it with all the self-sacrifice of which we were known to be capable, the enemy would run a risk of exhausting himself as much as us. In the meantime our allies were preparing to reënter the lists, and as their potential war strength was great, the Russians having men, the English both men and matériel, we should be given the opportunity of saying the last word. It was true, doubtless, that we lacked the unified command necessary to coördinate the activities of our armies, but

Falkenhayn knew that the Councils of Chantilly and of Paris had cemented the union of the Allies. A battle undertaken to wear us down and tire us out would draw us closer to one another, and would give us the time to work out our agreements and to assist each other mutually.

Falkenhayn was certainly aiming higher than he is willing to admit in writing. I have a sufficiently high opinion of our adversaries, from the point of view of their strategic science, to be convinced that in their important undertakings their plans rested on sound reasoning.

Therefore I believe that the Chief of the General Staff, when he fixed on Verdun, had in mind actually a mighty effort; that when he closed in on a salient in our lines with his artillery fire and his assaulting troops he was hoping for its fall; that in drawing our reserves on to the right bank with a stream behind them, he counted on the impossibility of our being able to extricate them in case of need; that in calculating a rapid rush to follow on to the left bank, he foresaw that he might catch us as in a vast net, resembling a second Sedan; that he hoped by these manœuvers to open an immense breach in our lines; and that, in taking full advantage of a success of this nature against a French army cut into two separated

sections, the Imperial armies would have every prospect of pushing on to a brilliant victory. In an Order of the Day on February 12th, the Crown Prince made the following proclamation:

"Let us all realize to the full that the Fatherland expects great things of us. We must prove to the enemy that the iron will of the sons of Germany, set on victory, is still unbroken, and that the German army, when it advances to the attack, stops for no obstacle."

"Great things," "an iron will set on victory," "an attack stopping for no obstacle"—words such as these betray the true design.

These ambitious hopes, quite consistent with the character of the successors of Schlieffen, were justifiable in view of the brilliant successes won on the eastern fronts. The Germans might realize that fighting against Frenchmen would be a more difficult matter, but still their proud sense of superiority cannot be regarded as inexcusable, and made the pursuit of such an aim legitimate.

We shall perhaps never know the true intentions of Falkenhayn. But those that I have imputed to him do him more credit than his own discourse on a camouflaged theme. It may be objected that the Crown Prince, to whose clear reasoning I have paid tribute,

also took advantage of the light shed by subsequent events to illumine his ideas. I do not think so. For his *Memoirs* are stamped with soldierly sincerity, reflecting frankly the greatness of his hopes and the bitterness of his disillusion.

VI

Preparations for the Battle

THE German Fifth Army, as well as its Chief, was certainly bent on success, and expected it confidently. The proof of this lies in the thoroughness of its preparation, and in the amazing feat it accomplished in concentrating huge quantities of men and munitions with the deepest secrecy. The discipline and training which the Germans had cultivated so highly bore good fruit, and the example is worth taking to heart. The Fifth Reserve Corps, which at the beginning of the year held the lines on the right bank, was able to keep up appearances on the front so that nothing occurred to betray the feverish activity that was agitating the sector. During the first ten days of February, enormous masses of artillery were placed in position without being discovered and without showing any discernible traces; eight divisions [1] were substituted with

[1] From the Seventh Reserve Corps, the Eighteenth Corps, the Third Corps, and the Fifteenth Corps.

perfect orderliness for the Fifth Reserve Corps, which went back into the second line; between February 12th, the date originally set for the attack, and the 21st, the day on which it was actually launched, this great body of men crouched in the depths of the trenches and the ravines, under cover of the woods, and not a sign of any unusual occurrence aroused our suspicions. On February 18th, as I have said, our High Command, almost under the very eyes of the enemy, could still believe that danger was distant, or for the moment non-existent. The invisible forces, massed on the narrow front of attack, which extended from the Meuse to the Jumelles d'Ornes, consisted of six divisions [1] in the front line, assigned to make the assault when the battle should open; two divisions in the second line, and a thousand pieces of artillery to blast the way before them. (The Crown Prince in his *Memoirs* notes that he had at his disposition one hundred and sixty heavy batteries, that is to say, six hundred and forty modern guns, all heavy or extra-heavy, and all rapid-fire, to which we must add field artillery.) Two additional divisions [2] were so placed that they could extend the front of attack to the east of Ornes, beginning on the second or third day.

[1] From the Seventh Reserve Corps, the Eighteenth Corps, and the Third Corps.

[2] Of the Fifteenth Corps.

— Panorama of the Front North and North-West of Verdun, from the Heights of the Meuse to the Borders of the Argonne Forest —

To meet the first shock between the Meuse and the Jumelles d'Ornes, General Herr had only two divisions of the Thirtieth Corps [1] and some mixed artillery units, including about one hundred and thirty field guns and one hundred and forty heavy guns, the latter slow-fire, of an old model. Between Verdun and Bar-le-Duc two divisions were held echeloned in general reserve under the provisional orders of General Headquarters.

From the tactical point of view, General Herr could not have disposed the forces under his command in any way other than he did even if he had known exactly what points were to be attacked. For most fortunately the orders that he had received emphasized the importance of not piling up men in the forward zone, and not risking the loss of numbers of effectives in the opening stages of an engagement. General de Langle de Cary, in command of the Central Army Group, had issued the following wise counsels:

"The first lines are not all that we must expect to see smashed by artillery fire in case of attack, but the whole group of lines included in the forward position. Consequently we must not hasten to send up our forces to the first lines, nor even to reënforce the first-line position,

[1] Under General Chréties.

but we must keep men in reserve for the defence of our other positions."

The General had even ordered the withdrawal of certain batteries to the rear in order to make sure of being able to fire upon the enemy if he penetrated our lines.

I like to quote these counsels of General de Langle de Cary because they indicated real independence of thought at a time when our training in defensive tactics was to the effect that not an inch of ground must be yielded. In certain respects his principles are the foundation of those that guided me when I was preparing for the battle of 1918. They lacked precision, for when a commander thinks best to give up to the enemy his advanced position, in order to nullify the effect of bombardments, he must be ready to receive the attack farther back, not on "a number of other positions echeloned in depth," but on one "resistance position" accurately defined, to whose defence he will devote all the means at his command.

Precision was lacking in the organization of the defence of Verdun. For some weeks the army had felt that it was not adequately organized to stand up properly against a strong assault, in case of need. The chiefs had been working feverishly on the advance posts and on the rear, plotting out numbers of posi-

General Herr

Commander in February, 1916, of the Fortified Region of Verdun

tions without ever being able to complete the organization of any. Consequently, when the storm broke, it was necessary to cling to the only "resistance position" that actually existed, that of the line of forts. We might perhaps have saved all our forts and brought our enemies to a stop earlier if we had set ourselves to define and organize one single "resistance position," located between the zone of the advance position and the line of the forts.

VII

Opening of the Battle. Description of Its Nature

THE struggle was carried on with heroic courage, both by the troops and by their leaders. Bombardments by the German heavy artillery, during February 21st and the night of the 21st–22nd, preceded the charge of the shock divisions. Nowhere before, on any front, in any battle, had anything like it been seen. The Germans aimed to create a "zone of death," within which no troops could survive. An avalanche of steel and iron, of shrapnel and poisonous gas shells, fell on our woods, ravines, trenches, and shelters, destroying everything, transforming the sector into a charnel field, defiling the air, spreading flames into the heart of the town, damaging even the bridges and Meuse villages as far as Genicourt and Troyon. Heavy explosions shook our forts and wreathed them in smoke. It would be impossible to describe an action of the kind. I believe that it has never been equalled in violence, and it concentrated the devastating fire of

more than two million shells in the narrow triangle of land between Brabant-on-Meuse, Ornes, and Verdun.

During the afternoon of the 21st and the morning of the 22nd, after a night in which the artillery had incessantly kept up its infernal pounding, the German troops advanced in small formations, the different waves pushing one another forward, hoping to progress without opposition. Imagine their amazement and their disappointment to see everywhere along their route the French rising from the wreck, exhausted and in tatters to be sure, but still formidable, defending the ruins from every possible point of vantage.

The resistance offered by the chasseurs under Driant, the soldier-politician who wrote *The War of To-Morrow* and *The War of Fortifications,* is worthy of special remembrance. In the Caures woods the Fifty-sixth and Fifty-ninth Battalions of chasseurs stood guard, with a few units from the One Hundred and Sixty-fifth Infantry Regiment, about twelve hundred men in all. They were supported by six batteries of 75's and eight heavy batteries. Four regiments of the German Twenty-first Division (the Eightieth, the Ninety-first, the Eighty-seventh, and the Eighty-eighth) attacked them; that is to say, between eight

and ten thousand men, supported by seven batteries of 77's and about forty heavy batteries. The preliminary bombardment had absolutely crushed them, most of their shelters had been blown up by exploding shells, and their losses even before they met the enemy were very heavy. In spite of everything, our chasseurs held their positions in the depths of the woods, surrounded and hunted down from every side, for nearly twenty-four hours. I quote the moving words of Lieutenant Colonel Grasset, who, with a trained historian's knowledge, wrote a detailed account of those days at Verdun, and described this splendid feat of arms:

"Colonel Driant was in a shell-hole, together with Quartermaster Leclère and Chasseur Papin, who did not leave his side. A bullet struck Papin. The Colonel made a temporary bandage for him, shook hands with him, and left the shell-hole by himself, approaching a trench in which Chasseur Lefèvre was waiting for him. But instead of turning to the left to follow the sheltering line of a low summit, as Lieutenant Simon was doing at the same moment, he went directly under fire from machine guns. About ten yards from the trench, a bullet hit him in the forehead and he fell without a word.

"A little later, Sergeant Lautrez, who was crossing the road a hundred yards or so to the south, saw the Colonel lying on the spot where he had been killed. He was no better able to reach him under the hail of bullets than

— Lieutenant Colonel Driant —

Killed, 22nd of February, 1916, in the *Bois des Coures,* While Commanding the 56th and 59th Battalions of *Chasseurs*

had been Chasseur Lefèvre. Major Renouard was passing very near at the time, making his way due south. He disappeared behind a hilltop, and was never seen again. . . .

"Driant's noble band were all dead. That evening, from the Caures wood, a few handfuls of men emerged and reassembled gradually at Vacherauville. From the Fifty-sixth Battalion there were Captain Vincent, suffering from two wounds but saved for the time to die heroically on another battle field. Captain Hamel, Captain Berveiller, Lieutenant Raux, and Second Lieutenant Grasset, with about sixty Chasseurs. From the Fifty-ninth Battalion there were Lieutenant Simon, Second Lieutenants Leroy and Malavault, and fifty Chasseurs. These were all that survived of twelve hundred soldiers."

The troops of the Thirtieth Corps exhibited astonishing, almost incredible, heroism. Every center of resistance, whether it were a wood, a village, a network of destroyed trenches, or a chaotic group of shell-holes, was used by our units and became the scene of gallant deeds like those of Driant's chasseurs, where all contributed their share to the task of checking the advance of the enemy. The French, officers and enlisted men alike, realized the importance of their duty and fulfilled it with stoical courage. Lost as if in a raging sea, knowing that there was no one to hear their signals of distress, they bent all their

energies to staying the tide that was engulfing them, each in his turn, and they chose death or the misery of a prison camp rather than the safety that they might have won by retreat. Our men toiled and suffered more than can possibly be imagined. They did their duty simply, with no ostentation, and in so doing, they reached sublime heights.

Detachments from the two divisions in general reserve approached the front lines, first by motor truck over the Souilly-Verdun road, then on foot in small columns, using all the routes that led to Saint-Michel and Souville from north of the town. But as soon as they came out beyond the Meuse they were caught, held up, and thrown out of order by the bombardment, blocked by the evacuation of the wounded and by supply parties, and numbed by the cold during the long waits necessitated by the sudden over-crowding of all the rear posts. At the appointed meeting places, whence they were to enter the sectors to which they had been assigned, the units moving forward hunted for the leaders of the detachments already under fire and the guides assigned to take them in, while the latter, driven hither and yon by bursting shells and by gas, themselves wandering at random, were often not to be found. So the battalions and companies of the reënforcing troops marched haphazard, making their

way due north, advancing amid the smoke and deafening noises of the battle, and suddenly came into contact with the enemy, clinching with him and seeking to check him, for lack of any better means, by throwing themselves in his path. Wherever fate led, they took their stand, cut off both on the right and on the left, without liaison with the artillery, without definite instructions, without trenches to shelter them or to safeguard their communications.

The Twentieth Corps, hastily despatched from the detraining stations near Bar-le-Duc towards Souilly and Verdun, made its way, also without preliminary reconnaissances, on to the spur of Douaumont, which became the pivotal point of the struggle and the prize at stake. The men, mingling with those of the Thirtieth Corps, stopped up as well as they could the gaps in the lines, until little by little the first lines, though still confused and disorganized, took on a semblance of consistency. From farther away, the First and Thirteenth Corps were brought post-haste by the Marne railroads and began to detrain on the 24th and 25th respectively. Our artillery units were hurriedly reënforced by assigning to them the available batteries from the three new army corps, and they began once more to thunder. Their support renewed the courage of the troops and reawakened the hope that

their heart-rending sacrifices might not have been made in vain.

On the third day of the fighting, the enemy held our whole group of advanced positions north of Douaumont. Already public opinion in France, obsessed with the idea that ground must be held at all costs, was highly excited. I repeat, however, that such situations as ours are to be expected at the beginning of an engagement, and that the French people might have looked on without losing their heads, as did the troops themselves at Verdun according to the wise counsels of the local commander.

General de Langle de Cary continued to keep track of events with the utmost calm and a practical sense that cannot be too highly praised. He promptly took account of the fact that the enemy's advance on the Côtes-de-Meuse and towards the Verdun-Étain road endangered the situation of our units deployed in the lowlands of the Woëvre. They would soon be threatened from higher ground at short range, taken in the rear, and entirely cut off. Now the positions in the Woëvre had no intrinsic value except as protection to our observation posts on the Heights of the Meuse, and it seemed as if there was no objection to withdrawing as far as the foot of these heights. On February 24th, at eight o'clock in the evening, Gen-

— General de Castelnau —
General Joffre's Chief Lieutenant in 1916

eral de Langle accordingly gave orders to this effect, and the movement was carried out during the day of the 25th without hindrance from the enemy. No sooner was the General Staff informed than it ratified the orders of General de Langle. Nevertheless, General Joffre continued to feel some anxiety concerning the move and made a point of stipulating that it must not give rise to the idea that the retreat might be continued as far as the Meuse. He telegraphed:

"I approve in advance whatever decisions you may make regarding the withdrawal in the direction of the Heights of the Meuse of the troops stationed in the Woëvre pocket, if you think necessary. You alone can judge of the necessities of the battle. But you must hold the line facing north between the Meuse and the Woëvre with all the strength you can muster. Use the whole of the Twentieth Corps without hesitation."

To make sure that his wishes should be clearly understood by the men entrusted with their execution, the Generalissimo at the same time sent to the general in command of the central group of armies his right hand man, General de Castelnau. The latter reached Avize on February 25th at five o'clock in the morning. At a quarter to six he wrote out the following brief order:

"The Meuse must be held on the right bank. There can be no question of any other course than of checking the enemy, cost what it may, on that bank."

General de Castelnau then continued on his way to Verdun, in order to draw his conclusions on the spot and to study the conditions under which the Second Army should there be employed. The General Staff was at the moment moving that army towards Bar-le-Duc.

VIII

The Loss of Fort Douaumont and the Entrance of the Second Army into Line

AS I was available at Noailles with my staff, I thought it extremely probable that I should be assigned to the Verdun front, where the importance of the struggle and the numbers of reënforcements sent would justify the entrance into line of a new army. On my own initiative, I had already sent the head of my intelligence service to obtain precise information concerning the course of events. Consequently I was not in the least surprised on the evening of February 24th to receive orders to send my headquarters Staff immediately on its way to Bar-le-Duc and to report in person to General Joffre on the morning of the 25th.

I arrived in Chantilly at eight o'clock and was immediately admitted to the office of the Commander-in-Chief, whose usual calm manner was unchanged, though the atmosphere of his surroundings was feverish and excited. General Joffre gave me suc-

cinctly his impressions of the situation, which seemed to him serious but not alarming. He directed me to hurry to Bar-le-Duc and there be ready to undertake the work that General de Castelnau, who had definite instructions, would explain to me.

In order to be as quick as possible, I went straight to Souilly, a village on the road between Bar-le-Duc and Verdun, where I expected to find General de Castelnau. But the roads were covered with snow and sleet and my motor journey was a long one. I stopped only once, for a short time at Chalons, and yet I did not meet General de Castelnau and General de Langle, who were together at Souilly, until seven o'clock that evening. The reports of the fourth day of the fighting were coming in slowly, and seemed disturbing. To find out the truth immediately, I hurried to Dugny, south of Verdun, where General Herr had his headquarters. Between Souilly and the Meuse I passed the procession of supply trains, making their way towards Verdun, columns of soldiers blocking all the roads, ambulance sections moving southward, and above all, most distressing of sights, the wretched horde of inhabitants seeking refuge outside of the devastated region.

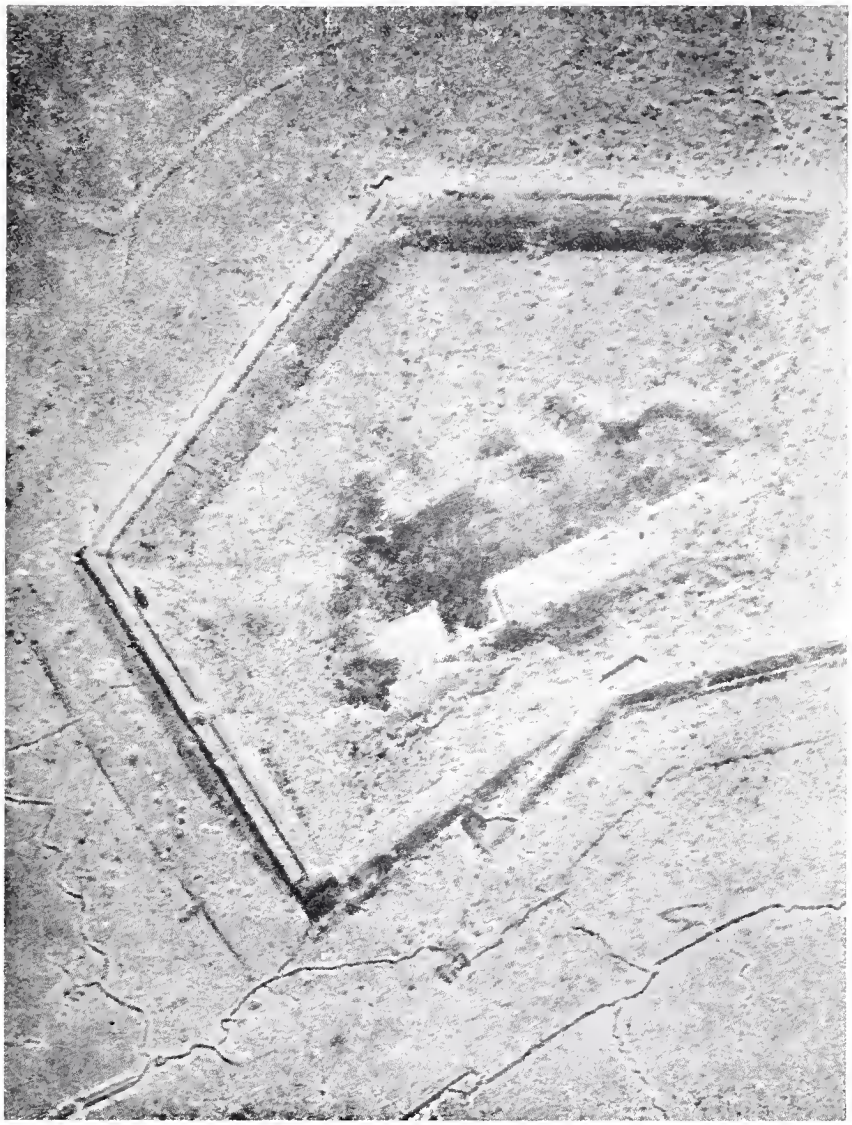
At Dugny a grave piece of news awaited me. The Twentieth Corps had fought bravely all day around

the village of Douaumont, but the fort had just fallen into the hands of the enemy by a surprise attack. In it we had lost the best and most modern of our earthworks, the tangible expression of our reasons for confidence, the lofty observation point from which we should have been able to survey and sweep the ground over which the Germans must advance, and from which the enemy would now be able to spy upon us and direct his attacks on the remotest corners of the consecrated battle field of Verdun. We had at the time no inkling of the causes of this most unfortunate occurrence, but according to the investigation conducted later by General Passaga, the facts were as follows:

The Brandebourg troops of the Prussian Third Corps, under General Lochow, were advancing through the wooded ravines that shut in the fort of Douaumont on both east and west. Our Twentieth Corps, which had entered the line with no knowledge of the terrain, and which had been unable to combine with the remnants of the Thirtieth Corps, was disputing the ground foot by foot as best it could. Relentlessly pushed back and worn out, our men soon found themselves driven to a point behind the great brooding mass of Fort Douaumont, which they believed was held by a special garrison. One of the

Brandebourg companies stopped in front of the earthwork, hesitating to attack it, while the leader, Lieutenant Brandis,[1] stared at the huge mass, covered by the newly fallen snow. Instead of the fear that the sight of so powerful a fortification would normally inspire, this officer felt the spell of a kind of illusion, a loss of balance, an irresistible attraction. Turning to his company, he suddenly shouted "On to Douaumont!" Sensing the attitude of his men, who believed he was leading them to certain death, he had something of a change of heart concerning the impulsive order, but still he was too brave to take it back, and he ran towards the objective. The company, to its own amazement, succeeded in advancing without difficulty, zigzagged across the ravines, slipped into the trenches, clambered up the snowy slopes of the central mound, then climbed down into the inner bowl; and there they found the casements open. They disappeared underground, and encountered a working party of French territorials, who, by the irony of fate, were proceeding to dismantle the pieces of artillery on the parapets. Lieutenant Brandis, hastily counting up the defending forces, could discover as

[1] The Crown Prince and General Passaga speak of the part played in this affair by Captain Haupt also, but according to General Passaga, to whom I owe the details of this feat of arms, it appears that Lieutenant Brandis was the chief actor.



The Fort of Douaumont after the German Bombardments of February, 1916

the actual garrison only one battery guard and a handful of gunners assigned to keeping up the service of supply for the turret of 155's.

It must be remembered that Verdun no longer counted as a "stronghold." Its earthworks, included in the whole system of our front-line defences, had no special armament or garrison, but had to be defended at the responsibility of the chiefs of the various sectors, by the troops at their disposition for the battle. Even for Douaumont, in spite of its paramount importance, no provision had been made in time. On February 24th the orders given to the Thirtieth Corps were designed to make sure that it should be specially manned and held, but between the 24th and the 25th, after many conflicts and omissions, responsibility had passed from the Thirtieth Corps to the Twentieth, and the order to occupy the fort had not yet been carried out when the Brandebourg troops came on the scene. Lieutenant Brandis is a hero whom we might well hold up as a model to our young officers. Most other men, even the bravest, would have hesitated before that impressive obstacle, supposedly concealing on its flanks large numbers of defensive weapons primed for action!

I myself carried back to General de Castelnau and General de Langle the news of the fall of the fort.

General de Castelnau judged that no time should be lost in "organizing" the command and avoiding further errors like the one that had been committed that day. He had already telephoned to Chantilly in the afternoon to suggest entrusting to me the command of the Verdun fronts on both banks of the Meuse, my mission being to "check the attack being made by the enemy on the northern front of Verdun." General Joffre approved the suggestion.

At eleven o'clock that evening, as soon as I returned to Souilly, General de Castelnau wrote out my commission on a leaf of his pocket notebook, tore it out, and handed it over to me "for immediate execution." So at eleven o'clock I undertook the command of the defence of Verdun, entirely responsible from that moment, but without as yet having any means of action. From an empty room in the town hall I got into telephonic communication with General Balfourier, commanding the forces engaged in the sector under attack.

"Hello! This is General Pétain speaking. I am taking over the command. Inform your troops. Keep up your courage. I know I can depend on you."

"Very well, sir. We shall bear up. You can rely on us, as we rely on you."

Immediately afterwards I called General de Baze-

laire, commanding the sectors on the left bank, and I made the same announcement to him, telling him of the particular importance I attached to saving our positions west of the Meuse. He answered as General Balfourier had just done, in a tone of devoted and absolute confidence. From that time on there was no doubt of sympathetic coöperation between the chief and his lieutenants.

A little later, towards midnight, General de Barescut, my Chief of Staff, arrived. I marked in charcoal on a large-scale map, pasted on the wall, the sectors held by the army corps already in the field, and the front still to be occupied; after which I dictated the orders that were to be delivered to every unit the next morning. These were my first measures on taking command at Verdun.

PART TWO

ORGANIZATION OF THE DEFENCE

I

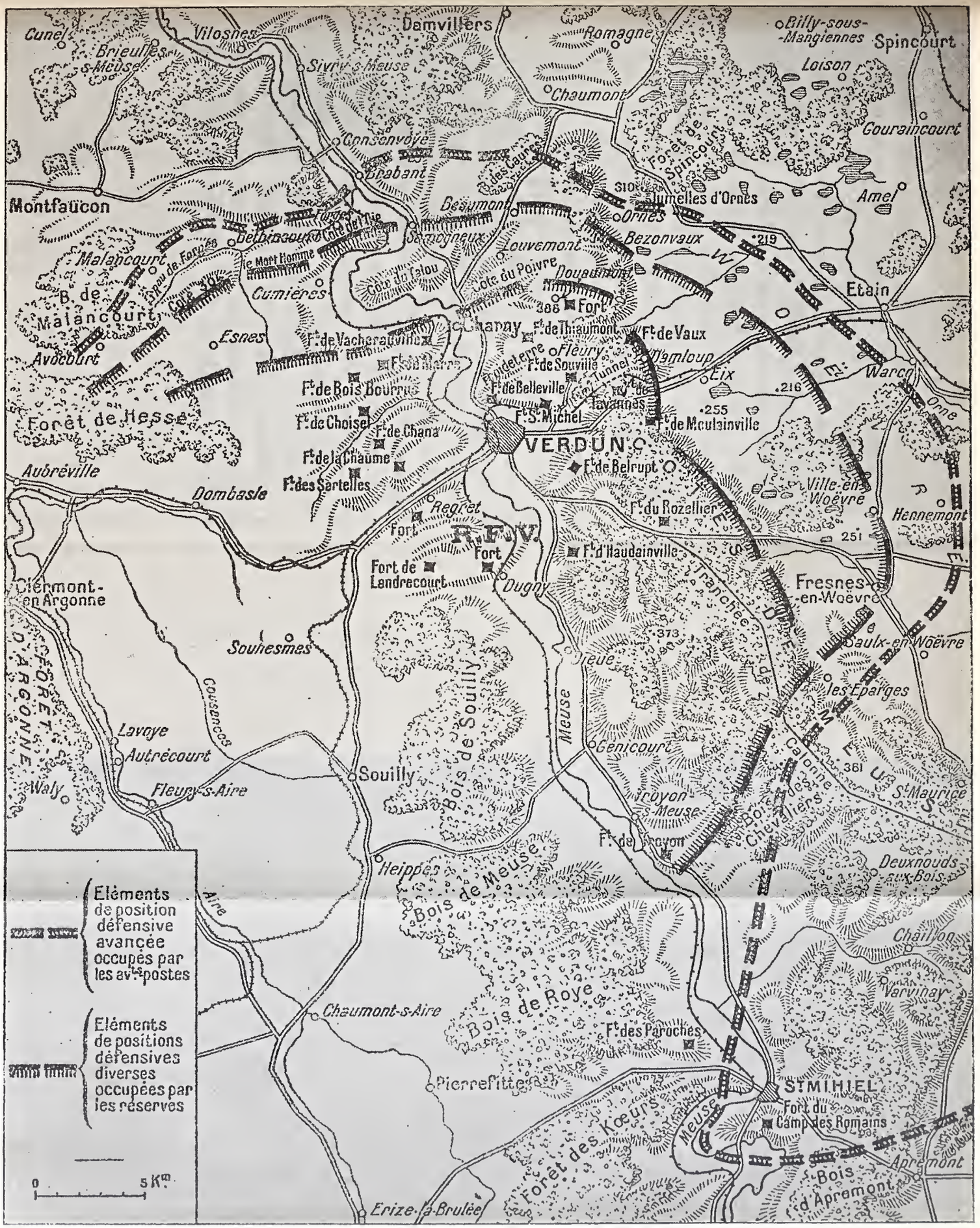
General Array of the Defending Forces

IT would be hard to describe the strange rumors that circulated in France from the beginning of the struggle, even while our troops and their leaders were carrying on with splendid heroism. It was said that the local commanders had neglected their duty and that severe disciplinary measures had been necessary. As soon as I took charge, I stigmatized these accusations as absurd. Not only were they untrue, but the commander of the fortified zone and his staff had shown remarkable foresight, and, under General de Langle de Cary's wise guidance, they had expected the attack and met it under the best conditions possible. Considering the terrific force of the enemy's drive, the fact that Verdun was still in our possession on February 25th constituted really a success. The loss of our advanced positions to a depth of five or six kilometers represented nothing more serious than a normal setback, one which we might have contemplated without

anxiety in regard to its results. Only, the capture by the Germans of Fort Douaumont, the highest point on the battle field, and the key position, would necessarily involve the defenders in consequences of considerable gravity, from both practical and moral points of view.

To return to the matter in hand, the staff of the Second Army, which arrived during the morning of the 26th, set to work to broadcast my first instructions. In these I began by defining one single "resistance position," which was to be defended with every means at our command, a position marked on the right bank by the very lines that we were holding at the moment and that left us no free ground for any possible further retirement. The lines were to run as follows: Facing north, through the advanced positions at Thiaumont and Souville, keeping as close as possible to the mound of Douaumont; facing east, through the line of the forts of Vaux, Tavannes, Moulainville, and the crest of the Heights of the Meuse overlooking the Woëvre; on the left bank, the line was to pass through Cumières, Dead Man's Hill, Hill 304, and Avocourt. The Meuse, between Cumières and Charny, was to be the line of defence and the liaison between the two banks.

In my Order of Operations No. 1, I defined the



The Fortified Region of Verdun at the End of 1915

mission of the army as follows: to check at all costs the attacks of the enemy; to retake at once all lost ground. This exacting order called on every man to give his best efforts to the unflinching defence of the specified line. In spite of the weariness and suffering which they would have to bear, the men who carried out the order must act as if at their keenest and strongest, and from the moment of the first signal they would have to take the attitude: "Not a slip is to be made; not an inch of ground is to be yielded." Every man's will must be bent to the task before him, without a glance backward.

The units in line were distributed as follows: The Guillaumat group of two divisions with the staff of the First Corps was astride the Meuse and extended to the east. The Balfourier group, amounting to four divisions, with the staff of the Twentieth Corps, was holding the high ground between the village of Douaumont and the fort of Vaux. West of the stream, General de Bazelaire was under instructions to hold his front whatever happened. The Fourteenth and Second Corps, facing east from Moulainville to Les Eparges, were holding the Heights of the Meuse.

No reserves remained except some completely exhausted detachments of the Thirtieth Corps, but General Headquarters announced that the staffs of

two army corps, the Thirteenth and Twenty-first, with four divisions, would reach us very quickly and that a third, the Thirty-third Corps, would follow within a short time. Under the circumstances there was no immediate need to send more large units to support the Second Army. We accordingly reported this to General Headquarters and requested them to send us instead some very strong artillery forces, as we were still suffering heavily from the fire of the enemy's heavy guns.

Three measures of fundamental importance completed the general scheme of the defence. In the first place, it was necessary to shift the first line of the Fourteenth and Second Army Corps to the eastern foot of the Heights of the Meuse, in order to leave no doubt as to the protection of our observation posts, and thus to compensate for the retirement from the Woëvre, ordered by General de Langle de Cary, at certain points where it had gone too far. The minor operations involved in the execution of this order were carried out without untoward incident. In the second place, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army reserved to himself the exclusive right to give the order to fire the engineering works and passages over the Meuse so that no one might take it on himself to retreat suddenly to the left bank and "burn his

bridges" behind him. And finally, the sectors on the right bank were warned not to count on any reënforcements whatever for the time being, so that the reserves might be echeloned on the left bank, ready to meet an attack between the Meuse and the Argonne, this being the most imminent danger.

During the evening of the 26th, General de Castelnau telegraphed to Chantilly: "The situation has not yet cleared sufficiently for General Pétain and me to be able to estimate it accurately. I believe, however, that if we can gain the two or three days necessary for the General commanding the Second Army to put affairs again in order and to put his measures into effect, all danger of losing Verdun will be definitely over."

General Joffre decided to make the Second Army responsible directly to himself, eliminating the intermediary step of the army group, and to place the Third Army, General Humbert's, under my tactical command. He hastened the despatch of reënforcements and took pains to do everything possible to make our task easier. He explained to the leaders of the British armies that we needed all our resources to carry on the great battle in which we were engaged, and induced General Haig to contemplate the early release of our Tenth Army, still in line on the

Anglo-Belgian front. The Commander-in-Chief approved my first arrangements by telegraph on the 27th: "I am greatly pleased with the speed that you have shown in the organization of the command on the battle field. At the point that the battle has now reached, you agree with me that the best way to check the enemy's attack is to attack in your turn. We must recover the ground he has taken. You shall have plenty of munitions, and the flanking positions on the left bank allow you to keep up a crushing fire on the enemy."

This last statement, at the time it was made, obviously expressed a wish rather than a practicable plan. But I was not without hope of being able to live up to the ideas of the Commander-in-Chief on this point, since he was willing to allow me the means of doing so.

II

Placing of the Second Army

DURING the last days of February and the beginning of March, my thoughts were chiefly occupied with the likelihood of an attack on the left bank. Each morning, when Colonel de Barescut arrived to report on the happenings of the previous night, I regularly asked: "What is going on west of the Meuse?" I was extremely eager to change what I shall call the placing of the Second Army before the threatened drive should begin between the Meuse and the Argonne. The troops had to be stationed in their positions, the artillery, which up to that time was only a heterogeneous and haphazard collection of units of every caliber taken from many different sources, had to be installed; and the service of supply, on which depended the life and health of the army, had to be organized.

The redistribution of the troops presented an extremely difficult problem on the right bank, where

on March 1st and 2nd the groups commanded by Guillaumat and Balfourier withstood terrific attacks directed against the Côte de Poivre and the village of Douaumont. Obeying the instructions they had received, the men held their positions everywhere, but such solid resistance along the hard and fast line worked like a balancing feat on a tight-rope. The violent shaking that our front received threatened to crack it at any moment, and the only wise course was to bolster it up. Consequently, I decided that behind the resistance position already mapped out on both banks, a barrage position should be established through Avocourt, Fort de Marre, the northeastern skirts of Verdun and Fort du Rozellier.

It was exceedingly important also to guard against the repetition of such accidents as the desertion of Fort Douaumont on February 25th. Between March 5th and March 10th the chiefs of the sectors were given detailed instructions on this point. Each fort was to have its own commander and a special garrison to be relieved as seldom as possible. It would be supplied for two weeks at a time with food and munitions, and definite orders should be given that no earthwork should be evacuated or surrendered even in case it were completely surrounded and cut off. These measures treated the forts as the chief bul-

warks of the system of defence of which they formed the skeleton, and the excellent network of communications that linked them to one another was counted on to facilitate the transmission of orders.

In the matter of artillery, General de Bazelaire, in command of the sector on the left bank, was requested to turn his batteries so that they should face northeast. These, though few in number, were ready-mounted, and could to great advantage sweep with their fire the batteries that the Germans were moving up near their infantry on the right bank. To follow up this measure, I unremittingly urged the activity of the artillery. When the liaison officers of the various army corps, meeting at Souilly for their daily report, began to explain to me in detail the course of the fighting on their several fronts, I never failed to interrupt them with the question: "What have your batteries been doing? We will discuss other points later." At first they were confused in their answers, but my vexation with them communicated echoes of my dominating idea among the various staffs represented, and their reports soon improved to a marked degree. Following the course outlined by me, our artillery began to take the offensive with "bursts of concentrated fire which really constituted independent operations, carefully prepared before-

hand, and which, without causing us any losses, inflicted loss on the enemy." Again and again I told them: "The artillery must give the infantry the impression that it is supporting it, and that the enemy's artillery is not overpowering ours."

Nevertheless the army, crowded as it was into a front-line salient, was in danger of being starved out if the bombardments became too intense over its central core and its communication lines. We had to keep the powerful batteries of the enemy sufficiently in awe of us to lessen this risk, but the result could not be definitely achieved without material reënforcements of considerable strength, and the enemy's artillery remained highly superior to our own. In Verdun, house after house was destroyed by shells or burned; the troops and the headquarters companies sustained heavy losses, and the only safe shelters in which to carry on the most important work of insuring the services of supply and communication were the strong underground galleries of the Citadel. All routes leading towards the city and the suburb of Regret, to which came all reënforcements, supplies, and matériel, were under constant bombardment from the enemy's heavy guns and airplanes.

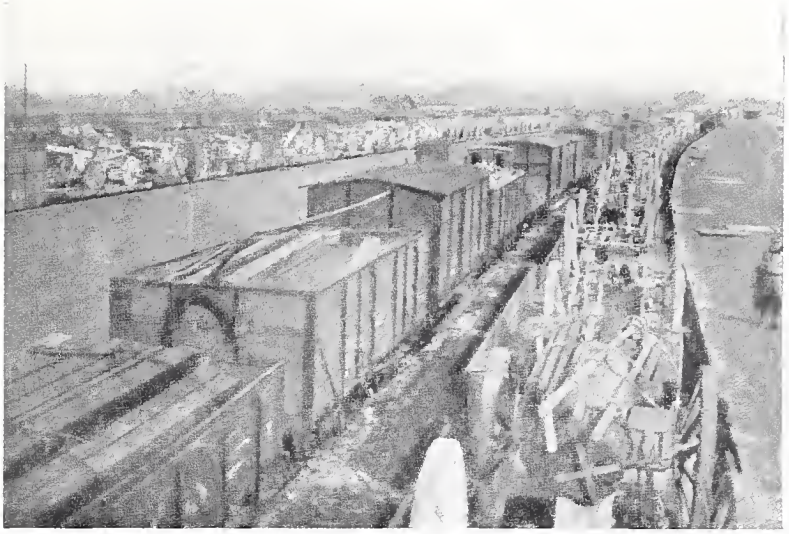
III

The Problem of Communications

THE Regret-Verdun crossroads, which was the advanced supply station for the army, was reached from the rear by four different routes. They were: first, the railroad from Commercy down the Meuse valley, useless to us because it passed through the enemy's lines at Saint-Mihiel; second, the railroad from Sainte-Menehould and Clermont-en-Argonne, which was often shelled as far up as Aubreville and over which nothing could be carried except some of the engineers' matériel; third, the little narrow-gauge railway called the "Meusien," which carried our food and some of our matériel; fourth, the departmental road from Bar-le-Duc, over which travelled an endless line of automobile trains carrying troops and munitions to the battle field. This road was under the direction of a "Motor Traffic Commission," and was divided into six sections, each in charge of an officer who was responsible for the movements over it, with the Military

Police, to assist him, under his command. A "guide service" was in operation at the main forks, to let columns of troops pass through the gaps in the automobile trains.

On February 28th, when the thaw set in, this road suddenly became impassable. Some way of getting it back into condition had to be found at once, and the question was one of life or death to the Second Army. We could not go far in search of materials, for time was too short and delay would have aggravated the problem of supply trains, so I had a large number of quarries opened between Bar-le-Duc and Verdun, where the soft stone of the country could be procured. Labor crews of civilians and territorials began at once to work them. Other labor crews, distributed over the six sections, spread the stones over the roadway as fast as they came from the quarries, leaving the work of steam rollers to be done by the procession of motor-trucks. So we got the better of the thaw, thanks to the energy and loyalty of all the men in the Army Transport Service. But we then had to meet another emergency, for the hard rubber tires on the wheels of the trucks were cut to pieces by the half-crushed stones, and the engines were terribly strained. The Transport Service at this point showed extraordinary resourcefulness and zeal. Improved equipment



Transporting Rations and Other Stores by the Narrow-Gauge Railroad called the "Meusien"

Transport of Troops by Bus-Train along the "Sacred Way"

was promptly installed in the automobile repair shops of Bar-le-Duc and Troyes; hydraulic presses for making hard rubber tires worked night and day; repair crews were stationed along the road; and the trucks were kept moving in procession, travelling at an average rate of one vehicle every fourteen seconds.

The Motor Service of the Army and the Traffic Commission of Bar-le-Duc, which accomplished this feat, consisted at the end of February of three hundred officers, eight thousand five hundred enlisted men, and three thousand nine hundred vehicles, composing one hundred and seventy-five automobile units. Between February 27th and March 6th they brought in to Regret in all twenty-three thousand tons of munitions, two thousand five hundred tons of matériel, and one hundred and ninety thousand men.

These figures reveal the importance of the rôle played by the famous "Sacred Way," and the danger that hung over us from a German advance between the Argonne and the Meuse. This was all the greater because such an advance would also have threatened with destruction the gallant little "Meusien," responsible for supplying the food, or five-sixths of it, for an army numbering sixteen thousand, six hundred officers, four hundred and twenty thousand men, and

one hundred and thirty-six thousand horses and mules.

Because of the uncertainty of our communications, I did not share, at the beginning of March, in the peace of mind of the country, which passed suddenly from extreme anxiety to somewhat exaggerated confidence. I was pleased nevertheless to learn of the faith that all the rear placed in us, and I was hopeful of justifying the optimistic statement made to the Commander-in-Chief on March 2nd by General Galliéni, Minister of War: "The enemy may go on with his efforts. But the French nation, serene and confident, feels sure that our army is confronting him with a barrier that cannot be overthrown."

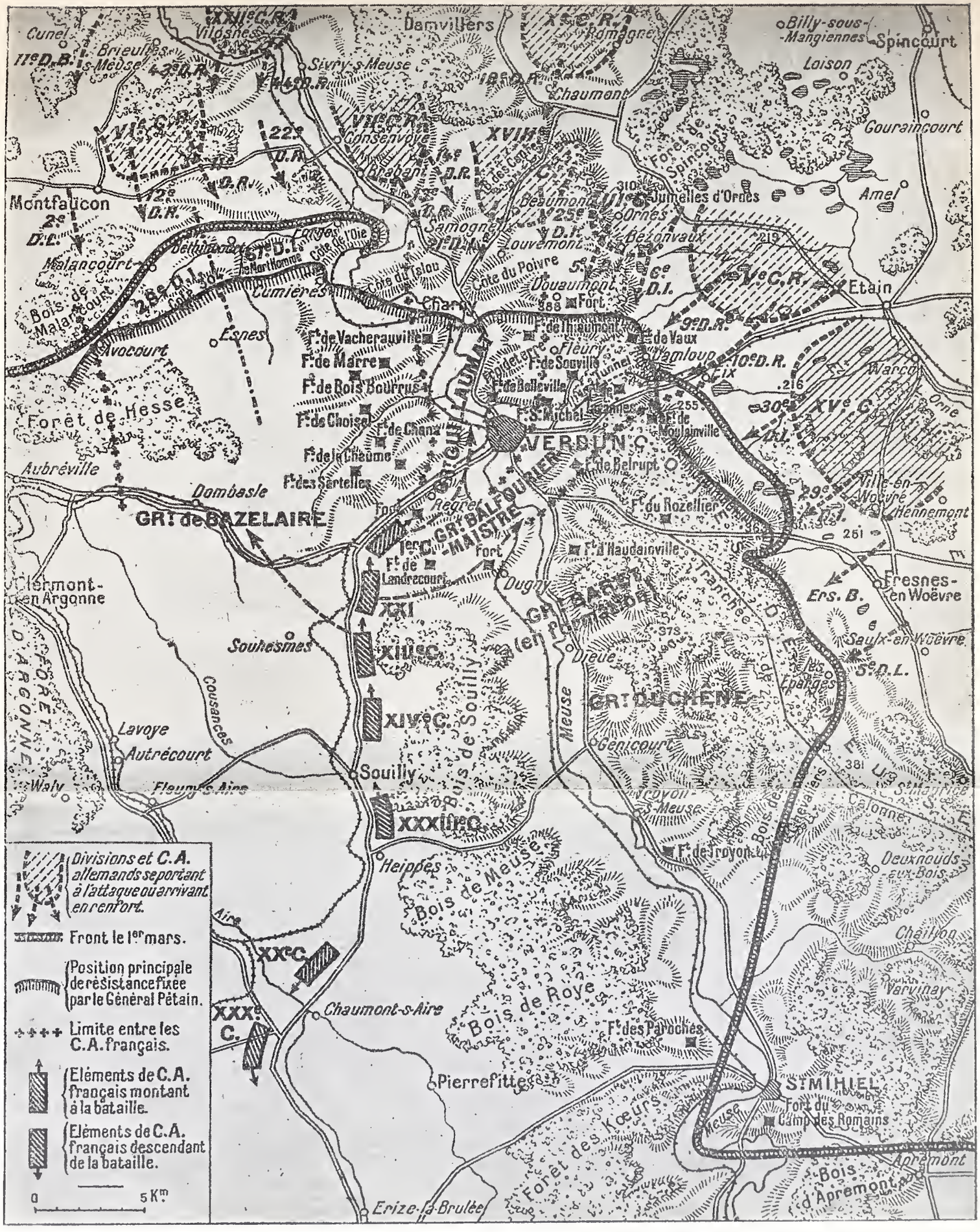
IV

The Critical Moment. Attack on the Left Bank

BUT that was exactly the question. Would the barrier presented by our "resistance position" between the Meuse and the Argonne hold against the attack that we were expecting with gnawing anxiety? Day by day we had better grounds for hope, thanks to the energy displayed by General de Bazelaire in deploying his units in logical order and in throwing their weight along the general line between Cumières and Avocourt, running by the Mort-Homme and Hill 304. This was the line that we wished to hold with all our strength, but we also left the advanced position along the Forges brook sufficiently manned by outpost units to throw into disorder any assault formation that the enemy might use, and to cause him considerable losses before he should approach our true "resistance position." When at last the enemy bombardments began, on the afternoon of March 5th, General de Bazelaire had the equivalent of four divisions in line, and one division in reserve.

During the evening of the 5th the Seventh Corps reported as follows on the situation: "The whole area included in the resistance position and the zone of the batteries behind it looks like a foaming trough. Shell holes overlap one another. The trenches on the back slope of the Mort-Homme and the Côte de l'Oie are completely wrecked." And yet throughout the days of the 4th and the 5th the enemy made attacks on the right bank sharper than ever before, and the Twentieth Corps became so exhausted that I was obliged, in spite of my reluctance, to replace it by the Twenty-first, under General Maistre. I then had only the Thirteenth Corps to support the Seventh on the left bank, but fortunately General Headquarters announced that the Thirty-third Corps was beginning to detrain in the neighborhood of Bar-le-Duc. Opposite us the German Fifth Army continued to conceal its dispositions. We could see some movements of columns in the Montfaucon region but we calculated that the Sixth Reserve Corps was receiving reënforcements of not more than three or four divisions.

After a bombardment similar in every respect to that of February 21st and 22nd, the German infantry began their advance, on March 6th at ten o'clock in the morning. Obviously they hoped to proceed without difficulty through the zone of death which



-- General View of the Field of Battle Around Verdun, March, 1916 --

their shells had created, as they had previously expected to do on the right bank. As a matter of fact, on the Forges brook and just south of it, they encountered at first only the weak units left in the advanced position. But in front of the lines between Cumières and Mort-Homme they were checked by the vigorous and well directed fire of our rifles and heavy guns. The barrier made by our "resistance position" was working! The ramparts stood firm. Struggles of extraordinary violence went on at that point all through the day of March 6th and began again on the 7th after another crushing bombardment from the heavy artillery. The Germans emerged from the low ground between Forges and Béthincourt, climbed the slopes of the Côte de l'Oie, and tried to rush into the woods of Cumières and capture the height of Mort-Homme by outflanking it on the east. They reckoned without the alertness and the energy of our troops, who, few in number though they were, awoke in good time to the danger and showed themselves determined not to let themselves be cut off from one another in the positions they had been assigned to guard. The units of the Seventh Corps protected each other's flanks with crossed rifle fire, and kept in close communication with both the artillery and the aviation. Their admirably ordered

fighting succeeded in its object. They assured the security of the "resistance position" and they even launched a vigorous counter-attack, on the morning of the 8th, which advanced them into the wood of Les Corbeaux and inflicted on the enemy losses corresponding to their own, which were very heavy.

I stood in readiness to support General de Bazelaire with the Thirty-third and Thirty-second Corps, but was keenly desirous not to draw on my available reserves. Once more, however, circumstances forced my hand, for, beginning on March 8th, the enemy engaged in a desperate attempt to break the Douaumont-Vaux front, and I had to give General Maistre the use of two reserve divisions. During the day of March 9th a number of enemy battalions, which had succeeded in getting a foothold in the dead angle at the foot of the Côtes de Meuse, hurled themselves with great violence against the fort of Vaux, reached the wire entanglements protecting the moat on the east, and were dislodged only by speedy and energetic counter-attacks carried on by the Twenty-first Corps. In the evening the German communiqué declared: "The armored fort of Vaux, as well as the numerous enemy fortifications near-by, were taken after effective artillery preparation by a brilliant attack carried out by the Sixth and Nineteenth Polish

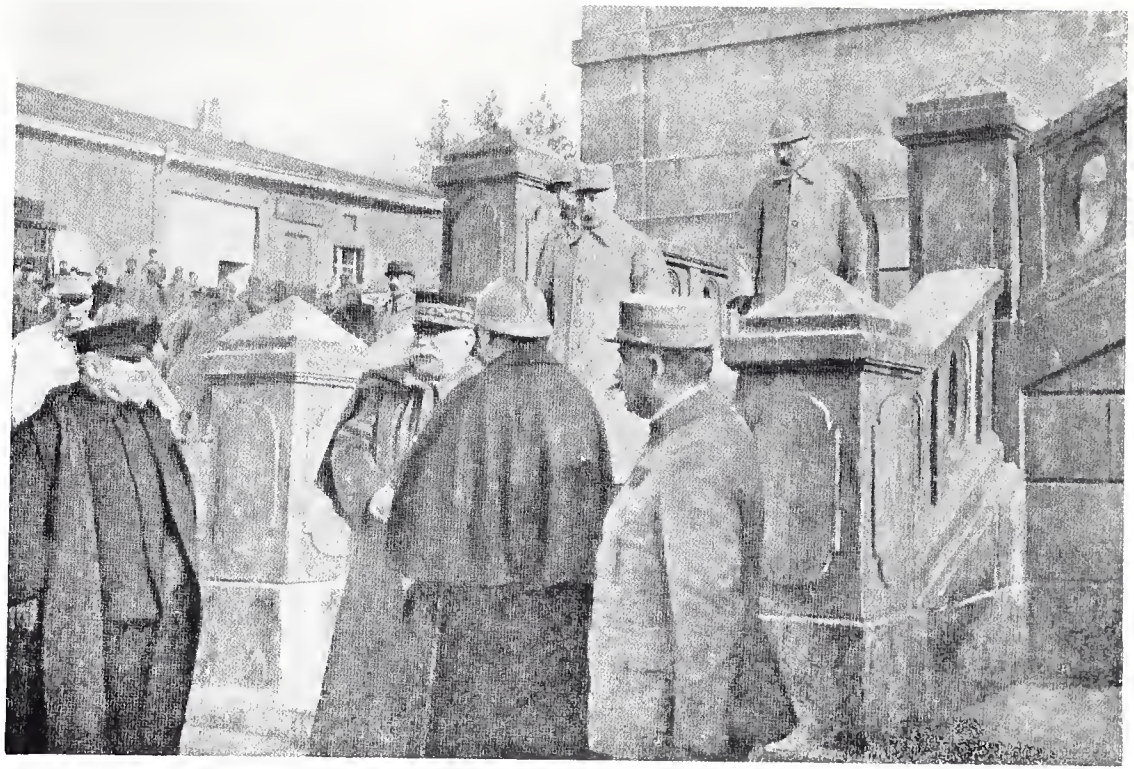
Regiments under the direction of General of Infantry von Guretsky-Cornitz, commanding the Ninth Reserve Division." This mistake and the disappointment that followed in its wake compensated our units for all their labors.

Songs of triumph were already rising from Chantilly. General Joffre came in person to assure himself of our ability to hold out, and on the 11th we received the Commander-in-Chief's exultant Order of the Day, which ended with these words: "You will be among those of whom it shall be said: 'They held the gate of Verdun against the Germans.'" But on that bitterly contested battle field, I felt too apprehensive still to consider our aim accomplished, and two days before General Joffre sent his message I had issued the simple appeal: "Have courage, all of you. Let us work together, for success is in sight."

I well remember the visit paid us during those strenuous days by M. Poincaré, President of the Republic. He came to bring us the welcome assurance of our country's faith in us, and as I saw clearly from the moment when we first began to talk to each other, he believed that the moment for our counter-thrust was near at hand. He was considerably surprised by my attitude and my plans when, on the occasion of one of my daily conferences for receiving

reports from the leaders of my various groups of units, he was present and heard me expressing rather an eagerness to be able to hold fast than any ambition to open an early offensive. During that meeting our faces showed, I am sure, inflexible determination, but even more clearly, I must admit, they betrayed keen anxiety. We were indulging in no exultant thoughts of victory then. Our talk was of nothing but the problems we must face, many of which were insoluble, and as far as I personally was concerned, my words consisted chiefly of admonitions, sometimes severe in tone, even though I felt perfectly satisfied of the zealous coöperation of all my men. But there were many details still to settle, notably in order to secure action in harmony by the different branches of the service and rapid renewal of food supplies, and it was not my way to make free with praise before everything had been done as well as I could wish. The memory that I still have of that report in the presence of our Chief Executive is of a sensation of disappointment. We were doing our very best, and yet we felt as if we had not lived up to the brilliant expectations entertained of us.

As a matter of fact, our troubles were far from over. For interminable weeks the enemy continued his attack, hoping by its means to reach a decision. On



— M. Poincaré, General Joffre, and General Pétain in Front of the Town Hall of Souilly, Headquarters of General Pétain —

the left bank the Germans used the Sixth and the Twelfth Reserve Corps to keep up to a minimum strength of between six and eight divisions the assaulting force that battered our lines over Hill 304 and the Mort-Homme, and these were supported by a great number, apparently increasing all the time, of mortars and heavy guns. Between March 10th and 15th a frenzied duel raged unceasingly for the possession of the Mort-Homme, on top of which our officers and enlisted men, mingling on intimate terms in their danger, fell side by side. General Debeney, explaining his operations, could write with pride: "I expressly commanded that there should be no retreat. The order was loyally carried out, and in setting the example of obedience one brigade commander and three regimental commanders were killed. Not a single man was seen retiring." On the following days the enemy renewed his previous attempt to outflank our centers of resistance on the Mort-Homme and Hill 304, but this time from the west, by penetrating along the skirts of the wooded plateau of the Argonne. Between March 20th and 22nd, by a sudden extension of operations in that direction, he captured our strong points at Avocourt and in the Wood of Malancourt, upon which he could look down easily from his observation posts on the hummock of

Montfaucon. This, the first German success of any account on the left bank, was won by the gallant conduct of the Eleventh Bavarian Division, one of the crack units, whose sudden charge at first took our troops by surprise. But our men quickly rallied and on March 29th fought their way back by a counter-attack to the "Old Fort" of Avocourt, under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel de Malleray, who, having reached his objective, fell with a mortal wound. The harm already done was not altogether undone, but at least the breach that had been temporarily opened in the flank of the Argonne Forest was again healed, and such incidents as these kept up the spirit and courage of the army.

During the latter half of March and the beginning of April, the situation continued extremely tense along the whole line of our positions on both banks, from Avocourt on the west to Vaux on the east. Driving their twenty shock divisions forward, sometimes all together, sometimes in turn, the enemy generals attempted to crash their way through our lines and make an end of us. For this enterprise, the Crown Prince had at his disposition two attacking groups, which he kept in constant action, General von Gallwitz on the west and General von Mudra on the east. I have often wondered what was the explanation of

The Entrance of the Fort of Vaux, March 14, 1916

this surprising use on the east of a general who had always seen the possibilities of attacking from the west and who was more familiar than anyone else with the vantage points on the front between the Meuse and the Argonne. It may have been our salvation, for this organization of the command did not work out as well as was hoped. General von Mudra should normally have been kept on the left bank, so that the enemy might profit by his extensive knowledge of the terrain. Had he been there, he would certainly have followed up our setback in the Wood of Malancourt on March 20th and might have seriously endangered our hold on Hill 304.

General Headquarters was not aware of the extent of our difficulties. To them it appeared that the struggle was being allowed to lag and that we were delaying our counter-thrusts. On April 8th, when I had reported a straightening of our lines south of Béthincourt, a strong point which from that time on would have made a useless salient jutting forward from our "resistance position," I promptly received instructions to reëstablish the *status quo* by "an energetic and powerful offensive to be launched as soon as possible." I telegraphed back on March 9th: "The situation is not discouraging on the east bank. I hope eventually to bring the enemy to an absolute stop.

But a great deal depends on the selection of our positions. I therefore request you to have confidence in me, and not to allow yourselves to be alarmed by any partial withdrawals, planned in advance, which may take place."

General Joffre was not the man to allow any misunderstanding, however slight, to persist between himself and one of his army commanders. He immediately hurried to Souilly and there I described to him frankly the extreme violence of the battle that had been raging since March 6th. By that time our ordeal was nearing its end, and on his arrival the Commander-in-Chief was greeted by my Order of the Day of April 10th, the first one, since I had assumed the command, in which I made any mention of success or hinted that we were heading toward victory:

"April 9th is a glorious day for our armies. The violent assaults of the Crown Prince's soldiers have been beaten back at every point. The men of the Second Army, infantry, artillery, engineers, and aviators alike, have vied with one another in heroism. They all deserve praise. The German attacks are certainly not over yet. Every man must watch and work for further success. We must all have courage, for victory shall be ours."

I demonstrated to the Commander-in-Chief the new organization of the front line. General de Baze-

laire's former group on the west was now broken up into three, as follows: General Alby, with the staff of the Thirteenth Corps; General Balfourier with the staff of the Twentieth Corps, barely reconstituted; and General Berthelot with the staff of the Thirty-second Corps. On the east two groups held the north front: General Descoins with the staff of the Twelfth Corps, and General Nivelle with the staff of the Third Corps. There remained under my orders two Army Corps staffs, the Seventh and the Twenty-first, with four divisions which were worn out and hardly fit to send back into the line. Judging from the large number of divisions that were included at one time or another in these army corps, one might think that we had had, at least once in a while, numerical superiority over the enemy, but such a supposition is not borne out by an accurate estimate of the situation. As a matter of fact, we coöperated with General Headquarters in arranging quick and frequent reliefs, with the intention of never leaving one unit long in action, where the men were worn out in spirit as well as mown down. Each division, following a sort of rotary movement like that of a millwheel, after being called on to bear its burden of bloodshed and weariness on the Verdun front, returned to the rear or was sent to a quieter sector, there to recover

and become again available for other purposes. The enemy, on the contrary, changed their units very little, simply filling up indefinitely, both with men and with matériel, the gaps in their forces at a given point. The pursuance of such a system would inevitably end in literal exhaustion of the German units, but at the beginning of spring this had not yet happened and the enemy continued vastly superior to us in strength.

For these reasons I continued firm in the conviction that the time was not ripe for a great counter-thrust on our part. In accordance with my instructions General Nivelle outlined a plan and set to work methodically to make preparations for recapturing Fort Douaumont, without restraining our strength unduly at any point, and kept himself in readiness to seize any opportunity for following up some favorable circumstance. General Joffre approved this point of view and on March 11th, as soon as he returned to Chantilly, he telegraphed me his definite agreement: "During my inspection of General Nivelle's sector I noted with the greatest satisfaction that your instructions for taking the aggressive were bearing fruit, and the chief of that sector was counting on making the best of any advantage he might be able to gain on either side of Douaumont."

V

Delay in Intervention by the Other Allied Armies. Continuation of Single Combat between France and Germany

I WAS all the better satisfied to have attained perfect harmony with the Commander-in-Chief because, after my interviews with him, I could place very little reliance on the immediate intervention of the allies. Yet the allied general staffs had met at Chantilly on March 12th and decided that the offensives by the coalition should be undertaken "as soon as possible." On March 27th and 28th at Paris the representatives of the various governments ratified these good resolutions, with a view to bringing about the "final battle" if possible, and they parted with assurances to one another of their determination to pursue the struggle until it should end in victory. But it is a far cry from words to deeds. In the first place, Russia needed many weeks to reorganize her armies, and General Brussiloff believed that he could not undertake his offensive against

Austria before early June. In the second place, England, who was trying her unaccustomed hand at the game of conscription, found that it was increasing the numbers of her effectives only by slow degrees. While they were loyally intending to launch a great effort on the Somme in connection with our left wing, the English did not believe that they could be ready at the earliest before the month of July. In other words, we were to continue until summer to bear the brunt of the struggle alone!

On March 27th, after the first meeting of the representatives of the Allied governments at Paris, General Joffre wrote to General Haig in the following terms: "The violent offensive that the German armies have undertaken in the Verdun region should not result in deterring us from our plan of action on which we mutually agreed. Both you and we must devote to our Somme offensive all the forces that we can possibly bring together there. The success on which we count depends largely on the extent of the front over which our armies attack. Our intention should be to defeat the enemy by seeking to break his front from Hébuterne to Lassigny. The zones of action of the British and French armies will be separated in general by the line running through Hébuterne, Hardecourt, Maurepas, and Bouchavesnes."

Our High Command was setting a magnificent example of energy in proposing, in spite of Verdun, to extend the Somme attack to the proportions long since defined—an offensive along a front of seventy kilometers, forty-six of which were in the French sector, involving the organization of a French attacking force of forty divisions and seventeen hundred pieces of heavy artillery. On March 22nd it approved the plan of General Foch, based on these premises. General Joffre, for the sake of assuring the preparations, attempted to deny the repeated requests for reënforcements which I was obliged to make from the end of March, and I remember feelingly a telegram from our General Headquarters on April 2nd: "You know the general situation of the enemy and of the French forces. Consequently you must do all you can from now on to free me from the necessity of calling at present on the last perfectly fresh corps, the Ninth, which I have available. It is obviously important, for the sake of the Allies, as well as for our own ultimate plans, to keep it in reserve."

Here was a dramatic conflict between interests which apparently diverged but which actually sought the same end. Our state was one of perpetual emergency. I found that I could not carry on without more means, and with a despondent heart I answered on

April 12th with a new appeal, which my conscience forced me into making: "It is necessary to send new units. I request urgently that these new units be picked from those which have not yet seen service on the Verdun front. The violent and incessant bombardment, the difficulty of communications and supply work, the serious losses we are suffering, would be enough to account for the rapid using up of the troops assigned to a second period of action on a front so perilous. You must note that the ranks of the troops who return to the front for a second time have been partly refilled from the class of 1916. These recruits have never before been under fire, and we have observed that the bombardment to which they are subjected affects them more seriously than it does the seasoned contingents."

Indeed my heart bled when I saw our young twenty-year-old men going under fire at Verdun, knowing as I did that with the impressionability of their age they would quickly lose the enthusiasm aroused by their first battle and sink into the apathy of suffering, perhaps even into discouragement, in the face of such a task as was theirs. As I stood on the steps of the Town Hall of Souilly, my post of command, which was excellently situated at the crossing of the roads leading to the front, I singled them out

for my most affectionate consideration as they moved up into the line with their units. Huddled into uncomfortable trucks, or bowed under the weight of their packs when they marched on foot, they encouraged each other with songs and banter to appear indifferent. I loved the confident glance with which they saluted me. But the discouragement with which they returned!—either singly, maimed or wounded, or in the ranks of their companies thinned by their losses. Their eyes stared into space as if transfixed by a vision of terror. In their gait and their attitudes they betrayed utter exhaustion. Horrible memories made them quail. When I questioned them, they scarcely answered, and the jeering tones of the old poilus awakened no spark of response in them.

The Commander-in-Chief understood my anxiety and yielded to my reasons. In answer to my appeal he ordered to Bar-le-Duc that same Ninth Corps which he had told me he wished to keep at his disposition, asking me only to give him in exchange for it my tired corps. The millwheel of Verdun went on turning! But the preparations for the Somme battle went on as well, for that same day General Joffre filled with the Tenth Army the gap on the Somme south of the Sixth Army, in order to articulate in two main groups the forces placed at the disposition

of General Foch for his offensive. These forces were still to consist of about thirty divisions and seven hundred pieces of heavy artillery. True, they were about a third less than had been originally determined upon, but they represented a heavy contribution from the French army, engaged at Verdun in single combat with the German army, which was making use of its entire strength.

The exhibition by our High Command of this firmness of purpose, unflinching vision, and stubborn determination to keep the initiative in the fighting in spite of everything, has attracted the attention of historians and is worthy to command their admiration.

The German High Command were by this time beginning to realize the seriousness of the situation. Logically they should now have gradually loosened their hold around Verdun, to look about, as the Allied High Command were doing, for another zone of action. Nevertheless they persisted stubbornly in their plan. They had the French army at bay and they were not going to let it go. They would continue to batter at the barrier presented by the northern front of Verdun in the hope of making a breach in it. If the defence did not break down on the left bank, they would gather their forces together again and

strengthen them, on the right bank, and would drive straight on against the obstacle of the great forts of Vaux and Souville in order to drive us back to the Meuse and even beyond.

This ruthless decision amounted to the issuing of numberless death warrants. The Crown Prince was not satisfied with it, for no reënforcement of his troops was contemplated, and he was being asked to renew efforts which he knew to be hopeless. In his *Memoirs* he has expressed his bitterness at great length, and has complained of the part played at this time by General von Knobelsdorf, his Chief of Staff, who instead of supporting the opinions of his army chief went over to the side of the Chief of the General Staff. It is my belief that the Crown Prince judged the situation aright, and that as soon as it became impossible to increase his strength sufficiently to assure him of breaking down our resistance, it would have been better to find another sector in which we might have been caught in a condition of greater inferiority.

As it was, the German plan of action contemplated a prompt resumption of offensive action on the right bank. General von Mudra, who appeared to be directing operations there with insufficient confidence and energy, was again transferred to command the

Argonne sector, and the attacking forces on the right bank were placed under the orders of General von Lochow, who had distinguished himself with his Third Army Corps in conducting the attacks against the Douaumont-Vaux front.

VI

General Nivelle in Command of the Second Army

ON the French side, operations were conducted with the end in view, for the still distant future, of a "battle combination"; that is, an offensive on the Somme, a defensive becoming an offensive at Verdun, where we intended, as soon as the concerted intervention of the Allies should begin, to take action with the aim of regaining our lost ground. From that time on, the General Staff was to resume its normal functions, necessarily taking a step back, and would no longer assert itself on any one of the fields of battle except through the commanders of the army groups as intermediaries.

On April 19th, General de Castelnau telephoned me from Chantilly that the Commander-in-Chief would very soon, on the retirement from active duty of General de Langle de Cary, hand over to me the Central Army Group, reconstructed progressively with all the Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Armies.

The Second Army, of which General Nivelle would take command, would no longer be under the direct orders of General Headquarters, and I, in my new position, would continue to direct its operations.

This piece of information gave me no pleasure. I should have liked not to withdraw from close association with my troops before they should experience under my direct orders the satisfaction of the great reprisals upon which we were counting. But after all, it appeared that these were not soon to be undertaken, and at the end of April the Third Corps was taking the measure of the ground it must cover before reaching its objectives. A terrible struggle was going on in the ravine of La Caillette between Souville and Douaumont. The battalions of Mangin's division were making their way foot by foot with a determination that nothing could shake, and were systematically taking hold of the spurs that rose toward the foot of Douaumont. They had been instructed to close in on the earthwork, and to effect a nearer approach by tunnelling, in order to reduce as much as possible the distance to be covered in the assault. Their courage and tenacity in carrying out this task in spite of every difficulty surpassed all our hopes, and it was most encouraging, as one looked from the Souville observation post, to see them gain-

-- The Battle of Verdun in April 1916 --

ing each day a few feet of ground, and at once organizing for the defence their rudiments of trenches. Often, as I gazed at them with admiration, I reflected that they were carrying on the tradition to which the siege of Sebastopol had given birth. But the valor of our men, subjected to the pitiless fire of modern weapons, the poisonous fumes of gases, the constant danger from bombs, was infinitely greater than that of their predecessors in the Crimea. For the enemy left them not a moment's peace. As each of their tentacles was unfurled in his direction, he met it with destructive and methodically directed fire from his *minenwerfer* and his mortars, then he launched against it his assaulting waves, one after the other. Frenzied combats developed at close quarters between those two groups of soldiers, equally brave, fighting each other desperately for every shred of soil as if the whole fate of their countries was at stake on those minute battle fields.

So my grief was profound when the decision of which I had been informed went into effect, and on May 1st at midnight I handed over to General Nivelle the command of the Second Army. I established my new headquarters at Bar-le-Duc and set to work to carry out as best I could the order issued by the Commander-in-Chief on the 28th:

"General Pétain is under specific instructions to see that all the positions along the whole front held by the Central Army Group are safe, and as far as the Verdun front is concerned, he is to capture Fort Douaumont."

I was also directed to keep the strength of the Verdun army up to twenty-four divisions, with no other resources upon which to draw than those of the Central Army Group. I was even to attempt to reduce that number.

VII

The Balance Sheet as of May 1st

LET us sum up the account as it stood at that time, after two months of battle. The Second Army, on May 1st, consisted of effectives to the number of thirteen thousand, six hundred officers, five hundred and twenty-five thousand men, one hundred and seventy thousand horses and mules, listed under seven army corps.[1] These figures are high, but they do not include the fighting forces only. The various auxiliary services used a considerable number of men, and moreover, our system of rapid and frequent reliefs necessitated our keeping within the territory occupied by the army twice the number of units actually concerned in the fighting. The turning of the mill-wheel had already swept through Verdun forty divisions, by which I do not mean that all these had

[1] These were as follows in order from west to east: the Seventh (General de Bazelaire); the Ninth (General Curé); the Thirty-second (General Berthelot); the Twelfth (General Descoins); the Third (General Lebrun, replacing General Nivelle); the Fourteenth (General Baret); the Second (General Duchêne).

been used up. As a matter of fact, most of these divisions had been withdrawn before they were exhausted, and transferred for a time to quiet sectors, then again shortly afterwards into sectors where fighting was in progress. We could count on reconstructing them largely with the men who had been wounded during the first year of the war and who were now recovered, so that it was not until the end of March that we began to fill the gaps with the young men from the class of 1916.

Thus, in spite of the fact that our losses already amounted to three thousand officers and a hundred and thirty thousand men, the management of our effectives did not yet present too difficult a problem, and we were using only a small proportion of twenty-year-old soldiers.

The mass of combatants was composed of seasoned men, "grown old in experience of war," whose average age was from twenty-five to twenty-six years. Like the "grognards" of the First Empire, they constituted a generation of veterans whose physical vigor and moral strength were altogether extraordinary. They had made up their minds that they would save Verdun, and endured superhuman ordeals with stoicism, resigning themselves whole-heartedly, perhaps not without a touch of fatalism, to the strenuous tasks

imposed upon them. Their spirit was not so much enthusiasm as virile determination, and their strength was founded principally on their inflexible purpose to defend their families and their homes from the invader. They were soldiers in the highest sense of the word, grim and resolute, accepting in their day's work both danger and suffering. When their time came to enter the line, they advanced with unfaltering steps to meet their fate, fully knowing what was in store for them. No one who saw these men at Verdun could ever forget them!

They had the implicit confidence of the French people, who thought of them as supermen, ready and able at any time to perform deeds of marvellous valor. There was something fantastic in the ideas of the general public, which, as it believed in the intervention of mysterious forces, was prone to underestimate the true wretchedness and suffering of our soldiers, and to overestimate their powers. Hence came the feverish impatience with which a stroke of deliverance, for which the time was not yet ripe, was expected. Nevertheless we appreciated at its full value the high esteem in which we were held by our countrymen, and in order to be worthy of it we strove each day to do better than before.

Our superhuman resistance cast a beam of light

beyond the bounds of our own land, and everywhere in the camps of the Allies new hope was born. Since France by herself was capable of accomplishing so much, it was felt that nothing was impossible to the united armies of the coalition. From the capital cities of the friendly nations and from the headquarters of their staffs, messages of congratulation poured in to Chantilly. The English were the first to join in our gratification and they attempted to hasten their entry into the lists at our side in the coöperative offensive that had been decided upon. General Cadorna visited the French front and spoke with admiration of the "calm tenacity" of our troops. The Italian Chamber of Deputies applauded the French army and stated its conviction that we had saved Europe. Prince Alexander of Serbia, after having seen the battle field of Verdun, expressed his enthusiasm to our Ministerial Council. Our ambassador at Petrograd received from our powerful eastern allies the most affecting expressions of admiration and the promise of prompt and vigorous collaboration.

To sum up, Verdun held. In spite of the fact that the French army alone had been waging for three months a battle of unprecedented violence, its losses were not alarmingly heavy, and our High Command

remained in a position where its liberty of action was untrammelled.

Against us was the German Fifth Army,[1] with between seven and eight army corps on which to draw for replenishment, keeping its actual fighting strength up to that of about twenty divisions, with very strong assistance from its artillery and aviation. Not more than seven or eight divisions had been withdrawn from the front since February 21st. That is to say, the whole number of divisions identified as having been engaged at Verdun was only twenty-six. This figure, so low in relation to ours, is accounted for by the fact that, as we have already stated, the enemy's methods of replenishing his effectives were different from ours. The divisions were assigned positions in depth, filling up the front ranks from their own rear, and the different corps were reconstructed on the spot. Twenty or thirty kilometers behind the lines were depots for the divisions, the brigades, or the regiments, forming advanced echelons of the interior depots, and in these the men awaited their turn to be sent up, while they completed their course of military instruction.

[1] The Sixth Reserve Corps, the Twenty-Second Reserve Corps, the Seventh Reserve Corps, the Third Corps, the Fifth Reserve Corps, the Fifteenth Corps, and parts of the Eighteenth and First Bavarian Corps.

This method of replenishing their army corps allowed the Germans, generally speaking, to last out practically indefinitely. Two of the corps, however, the Eighteenth and the Third, were so completely exhausted that this system of sending up reënforcements from the immediate rear could not be followed and they had to be temporarily withdrawn from the front for reconstruction.

It is difficult to estimate the losses of the enemy, and it is possible that he will never acknowledge them. However, the Crown Prince wrote, looking back at the situation as it stood during the month of June: "Every day I doubted more seriously whether the French, with their system of rapid reliefs, were actually suffering greater losses than we." I believe his remark to be justified, for he was referring to the second stage of the battle, to the time when we were about to resume the initiative in the fighting, and when the Germans were persisting stubbornly in desperate attempts; but during the two months of March and April, I believe that our enemies suffered less attrition than we. It is true that in their repeated assaults they came out from under cover more often than did our troops, and that the formations that they employed were sometimes very vulnerable, but the fact remains that the innumerable shells that contin-

ually fell from their guns upon the restricted area within which our units operated, opened bleeding gaps in our ranks, and moreover that our batteries, fewer in number and less well supplied, were able to do less damage among the enemy's units, spread out in fan-shaped formation over a larger territory, with well constructed shelters and wooded zones which assisted them to conceal their concentrations of men.

The German class of 1916 took part in the combatant formations from the beginning of the year, in other words shortly before ours, and toward the end of April there were still in the interior depots about nine hundred thousand men. If we bear in mind that at the end of 1915 there were a million, five hundred thousand of these, we conclude that between the beginning of January and the end of April between five and six hundred thousand had been assigned to the armies. The German Fifth Army, which was the only one involved in important operations during that period, must have used a large proportion of these effectives, and we can imagine from this that its losses, though they may not have equalled ours, must have been very serious.

German public opinion was now beginning to change its tune, and there was no further talk of taking Verdun or of ending the war. The newspapers

resigned themselves to reporting negative results, sometimes imaginary. An article that appeared in the *Hamburger Nachrichten* at the end of April is a perfect example, explaining as it does that the great battle which was in progress would end in checking our offensive against Lorraine.

"Every fair minded critic," wrote the author of this article, "knows that any fortress which constitutes such a strong base of operations cannot be quickly taken, and that the success that we have achieved to date represents the utmost possible under the circumstances. We shall not take up the question of whether or no Verdun is impregnable. The future will have to answer that. We shall only point out what we have accomplished. The purpose of a war is to reduce the enemy's army to impotence. Fortresses in themselves are of no consequences, for they are valuable only as supports for an army, or, under certain conditions, as points of departure for an attack. We were recently informed that the great French offensive, directed toward Metz, was scheduled for the fifteenth of April, but the fifteenth of April has come and gone, and the great offensive has not been set in motion. That is enough to demonstrate the efficacy of our attack on Verdun."

Germany, formidable military power that she was,

Germany, reaping at that very time in her contest with France the benefits of her admirable military training and of her remarkable adaptation of matériel to the needs of modern warfare—Germany was losing her supreme confidence in her future and was beginning to see that her star was setting. For the second time, France was preventing the fulfillment of her destiny.

PART THREE

FINAL ATTEMPTS OF THE ENEMY, AND THE FRENCH COUNTER-THRUST

I

Exchange of Fruitless Attacks by Both Armies and on Both Banks

THE conflict of wills at Verdun from this time on became more and more violent. The Germans foresaw that their superiority in effectives would not last indefinitely, and they determined to multiply their drives against the Verdun front, counting on their ability to exhaust our divisions, which were there sacrificing themselves one after another. By stronger and stronger reënforcement of their artillery they intended to crush us with the power of their matériel. We in the meantime were getting ready for the return thrust, and General Nivelle assured me of his eager collaboration in this task, into which he meant to put all his will power and initiative. In one of the first bulletins that he issued to the commanders of his various groups he stressed "the many possibilities open to those who take the aggressive," and beginning on May 2nd, which was the date he and I had

agreed upon, he outlined the general conditions governing the attack that was designed to recapture Fort Douaumont.

The organization of the operation was entrusted to the group under General Lebrun, and its execution—involving other units of the Third Army Corps—was to be left to General Mangin's division. The latter set to work to awaken in his troops the spirit of offensive fighting, and he inspired his soldiers once more with eagerness for the "return thrust." The Wood of la Caillette, the possession of which was so constantly disputed, was used by him for this purpose as a rifle range and a training field. Each man, vigorously encouraged by his leader, regained confidence in his weapons, acquired the habit of returning two shots for every one sent in his direction, and attempted to gain ground by the use of saps and grenades. The whole division thought of itself in connection with its objective and aspired to the glory of recapturing the fort. In order that the assault might be carried on with a sufficiently extended flanking movement, the division was to have the support of an additional brigade of infantry, of one hundred and fifty pieces of artillery, of which ten or more were very heavy, some attaining a caliber of 370, and of several squadrons of airplanes. Colonel Estienne, an

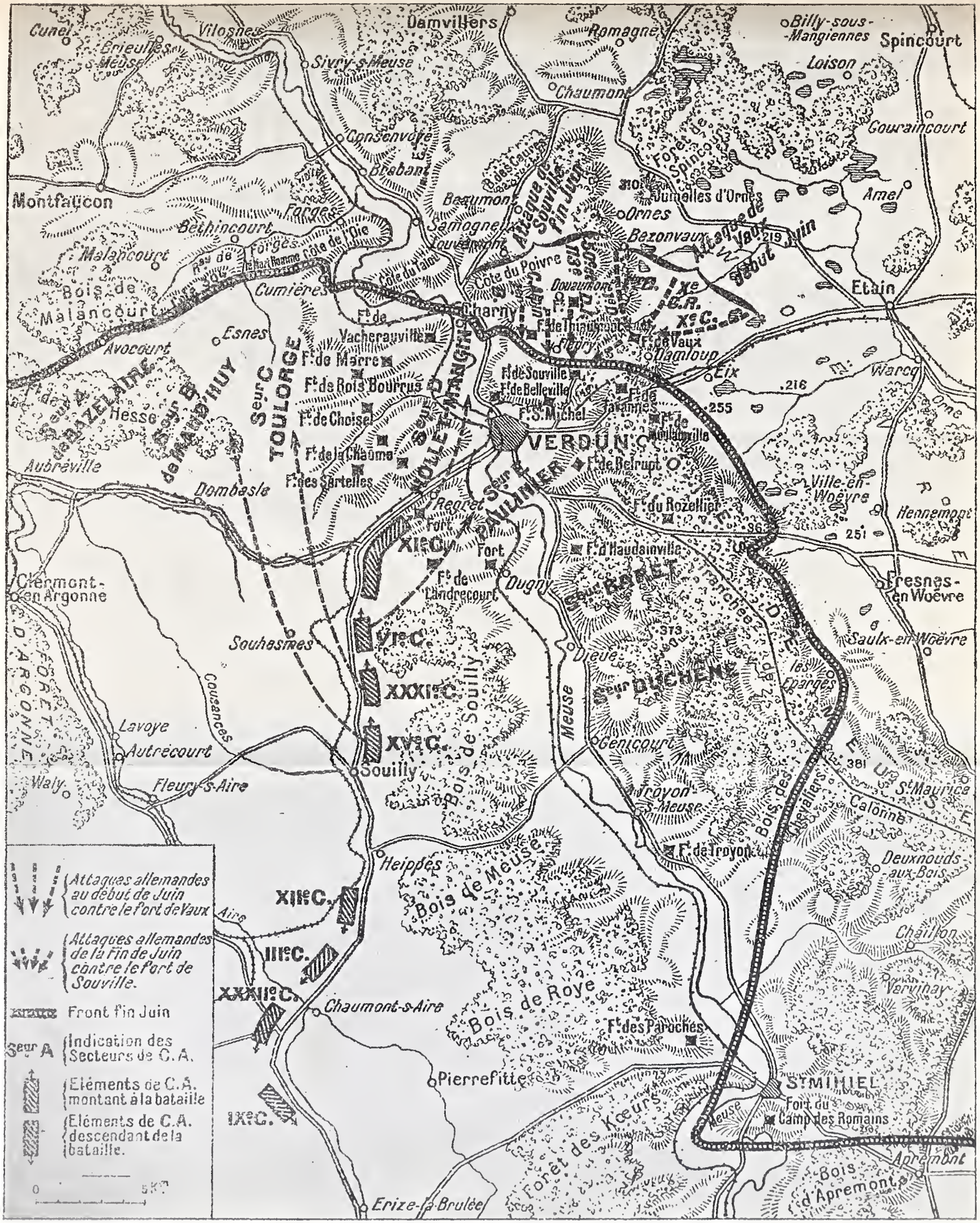
General Mangin at His Headquarters

artillery officer of wide experience, was associated with General Mangin to command the artillery battalions and separate batteries assigned to support the attack. He defined as follows his conception of the use to which these should be put: "The operation consists in directing on the position and in firing so as to get the greatest possible effectiveness out of our artillery, a thousand tons of shell a day for six or seven days, so as to dominate the enemy's artillery, to destroy his means of defence, and to break down his morale within the area of a hundred and fifty acres which is to be occupied."

This was the same formula that the Germans had been working against us since February 21st, and though we were just as ready as they to put it into practice, we could not do so without provoking them to retaliate with severity. In fact our positions, particularly those on the left bank, were unmercifully "hammered." It seemed as if the Crown Prince were trying to get in the last word on that side before transferring the greater number of his troops to the right bank according to the instructions of the Chief of the General Staff. He bombarded and attacked almost without intermission the observation posts on the Mort-Homme and on Hill 304, so that both heights were wreathed in smoke like volcanoes. On May 3d

our aviators flew over them and said, when they returned, that to a height of eight hundred meters above the ground the atmosphere was thick with dense columns of smoke rising from the explosions of the shells. On May 4th the Germans gained a foothold on the northern slopes of Hill 304, thus endangering the security of the "position of resistance" that I had defined in my orders of February 27th. This event stirred to immediate reaction the men entrusted with the attack, who were quite determined to recapture any, even the smallest, bit of ground which might be lost along that position. Lieutenant Colonel Odent, in command of the units engaged on the summit of the hill, leaped on to the parapet of a trench and shouted to his men: "Come on, men! Now is the time to show our courage!" He advanced resolutely, inducing several bodies of men, inspired by his words and action, to follow him. He straightened out our line as far as the embankment which overlooked the northern slopes, and then, having fulfilled his mission, he fell under the enemy's fire.

Among all the gallant deeds that I might have cited I have chosen this because it illustrates the force of the commander's personal influence under fire. This man knew perfectly well, considering the conditions under which he improvised an "immediate counter-



The Battle in May–June, 1916

attack," having no time in which to prepare for it, or to arrange for the support of the artillery, that he was attempting the impossible. Nevertheless his conscience spurred him on to make the effort, and the magnificent spirit with which he set the example carried him through to a successful conclusion. The knowledge that death awaited him there on the line that had been given into his keeping did not deter him, for the only thought in his mind was that he must win back that line. There could be no finer quality in a soldier than the determination to guarantee at the price of his own life the execution of orders on the battle field.

The inevitable result of our acting simultaneously on the offensive and the defensive would be that the divisions engaged would last even less long than before, and if we had any intention of keeping them fit for service in other sectors, we must make provision for renewing them frequently. I pointed this out to the Commander-in-Chief in a letter that I wrote on May 6th, and asked him to replace within a short time eight of the divisions set apart for the replenishment of the body of troops engaged at Verdun. I took advantage of the opportunity to call attention to the urgent need of succoring the Second Army. "In the end we shall have the worst of it if the Allies do not

intervene. Intervention by the English north of the Somme would have the quickest and most direct effect on our situation."

But there was the question of how we should envisage renewed activity elsewhere on the front. It was particularly important to avoid a repetition of the mistakes of 1915, and not again to involve ourselves in struggles destined to drag on indefinitely in the same sector and result in greater expense and loss to us than we could inflict on the enemy. So I frankly expressed all that I had in mind, and suggested to General Joffre that he arrange a coördination of the Allied forces that would permit us to launch a series of drives against the German armies, taking them by surprise each time, and so to inflict considerable losses on the enemy without running the risk of wholly depleting our own effectives. "We must outline a system on which we can work for a long time. In order to do so, we might consider the organization of three or four groups at different selected points of attack, and in each of these groups arrange the units in depth so as to have the organization farthest forward always ready to take action." I ended by saying that I wished these offensive groups might be made up without including any of the French army, which was already carrying a heavy burden at Verdun, es-

pecially in view of the offensives that we were contemplating.

On May 11th General Joffre answered that the Allies would not delay much longer in making a joint effort "intended to break or at least to weaken at once the resistance of the nations associated against us." But he confided to me that it was absolutely necessary for him to allot a share in the undertaking to our armies, even on fronts other than that of Verdun, because we were and must remain, willy nilly, the leaders of the coalition. Consequently nothing would be changed in the agreements pertaining to the important part assigned to General Foch's group in the Somme offensive, and I must count only on the fifty-two divisions of the Central Army Group to keep the army of Verdun up to a maximum strength of twenty-four divisions.

These were the conditions under which the operation aiming at the recapture of Fort Douaumont must develop. The conditions cannot be called favorable, since we were hampered in our use of troops, and for lack of strength were unable to extend our front of attack. I found myself obliged to approve General Mangin's plan without allowing him the extension he desired, and it would be necessary to concentrate our men and then to launch our

attack in the zone on the right bank, which was under fire.

Our fire for destruction began on the 17th and continued for five days without succeeding in definitely dominating the enemy. On the 20th, General Mangin completed the placing of his division and of the additional brigade assigned to his use as a reserve assaulting force.[1] General Lebrun's corps undertook the construction of nearly twelve kilometers of trenches and communication trenches at the departure parallel of the units, but they did not have time to make these sufficiently deep and every night they had to start their endless task all over again, for the German bombardments regularly destroyed during the day what they had already done. Beginning on the 20th, our assaulting troops suffered considerable losses, on account of the fact that our artillery fire was not superior to the enemy's, and only a few seconds before the attack a German shell eliminated the five officers who were grouped about General Mangin at his observation post in the outskirts of Souville.

[1] The Tenth Brigade on the left had as its objectives the southwestern and northwestern bastions of the fort, which two battalions of the One Hundred and Twenty-ninth Regiment were to approach while their protection on the west was to be provided by one battalion of the Thirty-sixth Regiment. The Ninth Brigade on the right was to send forward two battalions of the Seventy-fourth Regiment to the southeast angle, and these were to be covered on the east by a detachment of the Two Hundred and Seventy-fourth Regiment.

Nevertheless the division gallantly issued from its trenches on May 22nd at 11:50 A. M. The left wing made use of several breaches in the wire, reached the western superstructure of the fort, and there engaged in a spirited struggle. The right wing reached the eastern turret, but was checked in its advance at that point by machine guns that had entirely escaped our fire, stationed near the southeastern angle. That evening and during the night of May 22nd–23d, fighting went on within the fortification. Several of our units, which had gained entrance into the inside court, spread out along the trench between the flanks of the bastion, and by the use of grenades made some progress toward entering the interior galleries, but were opposed foot by foot by two companies of Germans. Unfortunately the enemy's batteries swept the area south of the fort with a devastating fire, thus preventing our reserves from reaching it. The result was that during the day of May 23d two of our battalions were left without support at the objective they had reached. During the morning of the 24th their situation became alarming, and in the afternoon they were destroyed or captured by the enemy, who counter-attacked on the north, the west, and the east sides of the fortification. The measures taken by General Mangin to retrieve the situation were not suc-

cessful, and during the evening he was forced to see his division relieved and that of General Lestoquoi substituted for it.

We continued, in spite of the failure of this first undertaking, to hope great things for the future, because of the fact that our troops had accomplished an almost impossible task in seizing and occupying the fort for nearly two days. The lesson to be learned from this fighting was that, when we should renew the attempt, we must see that greater pressure was applied by our artillery, and that we must extend further our front of attack. Here was a double reason why we must wait in patience until we had sufficient resources at our disposition to allow us to realize these conditions. General Nivelle explained this to his troops in his Order of the Day on May 31st:

"We must have courage, men! We must not for a moment allow any weakness to endanger the outcome of so many heroic efforts. Your indomitable energy will soon exhaust the finest troops of the German army. Your trials will soon be over, for our powerful allies will soon join us in other fields of action. We have asked you to bear heavy burdens and to make great sacrifices, and we must continue to ask them of you. This is inevitable in a struggle where the fate of every nation concerned is at stake. You are fully conscious of the greatness of our task, and you will not grudge your aid to the country

whose sole hope is in you. If you will all work together with the same inflexible determination, the glory of having played an important part in assuring to your country peace with victory will be yours."

II

Renewed Activity on the Various Fronts

THE German Fifth Army and the French Second Army had not yet reached the end of their troubles, nor had they yet experienced their ordeal to the full. From this time on they were to be involved in the joint operations that the High Commands had been planning for several months. The struggle became not less but more violent on account of this fact, and the "crisis" of Verdun was destined to reach its culminating point at the same time that the other armies awoke to renewed fighting on the other fronts.

After the middle of May, the military leaders of the Central Empires began to find in Austria-Hungary grounds for the gravest anxiety. The impatient eagerness of that nation to distinguish itself by a success, which it hoped would be easy, on the Italian front, worried its allies not a little. It believed that it was in that field greatly superior to its opponents, if not in numbers, at least in the organization, equip-

ment, and training of its armies, hence it cherished the illusion that it would be able in short order to settle the account with its age-long enemy. Falkenhayn foresaw that the collapse of the eastern front would follow in short order, and he attempted to deter his ally, but his reproofs had no effect whatever. Austria-Hungary was bent on shaking off the guiding hand of the German military leaders, and on achieving at least one success by its own unaided efforts. On May 15th the Austrians took the initiative and attacked in the sector included between the Adige and the Brenta, advancing for some distance in the center, in the region of Asiago. At that point their effort was checked. The strength with which the Italians reacted, as they promptly did, justified only too completely the darkest misgivings of Falkenhayn, who was forced to authorize a levy of important reenforcements from the armies in Galicia. Thus General Cadorna, by his gallant resistance and the return thrust of his troops, was the first to bring assistance to the French army, after it had fought unaided for three months against the bulk of the German forces.

Brussiloff, on his part, lived up to the agreements to which Russia had subscribed on December 6th, 1915, at Chantilly, and on March 28th, 1916, at Paris. During the course of the winter he had reconstituted

his forces, overcoming great difficulties in the way of organization, and had made his preparations with the greatest secrecy for the powerful offensive that we were so impatiently awaiting. He launched it on June 4th. Cleverly taking advantage of the confusion and humiliation of the Austro-Hungarians, he opened an immense breach more than fifty kilometers in length in Volhynia and Bukovina, and through this he hurled his armies. Whatever reserves were available to the Germans in the east attempted to check the spread of the disaster, but they were not sufficiently numerous to succeed, and the High Command was forced to send others to the spot at the critical hour when the British were expected to strike.

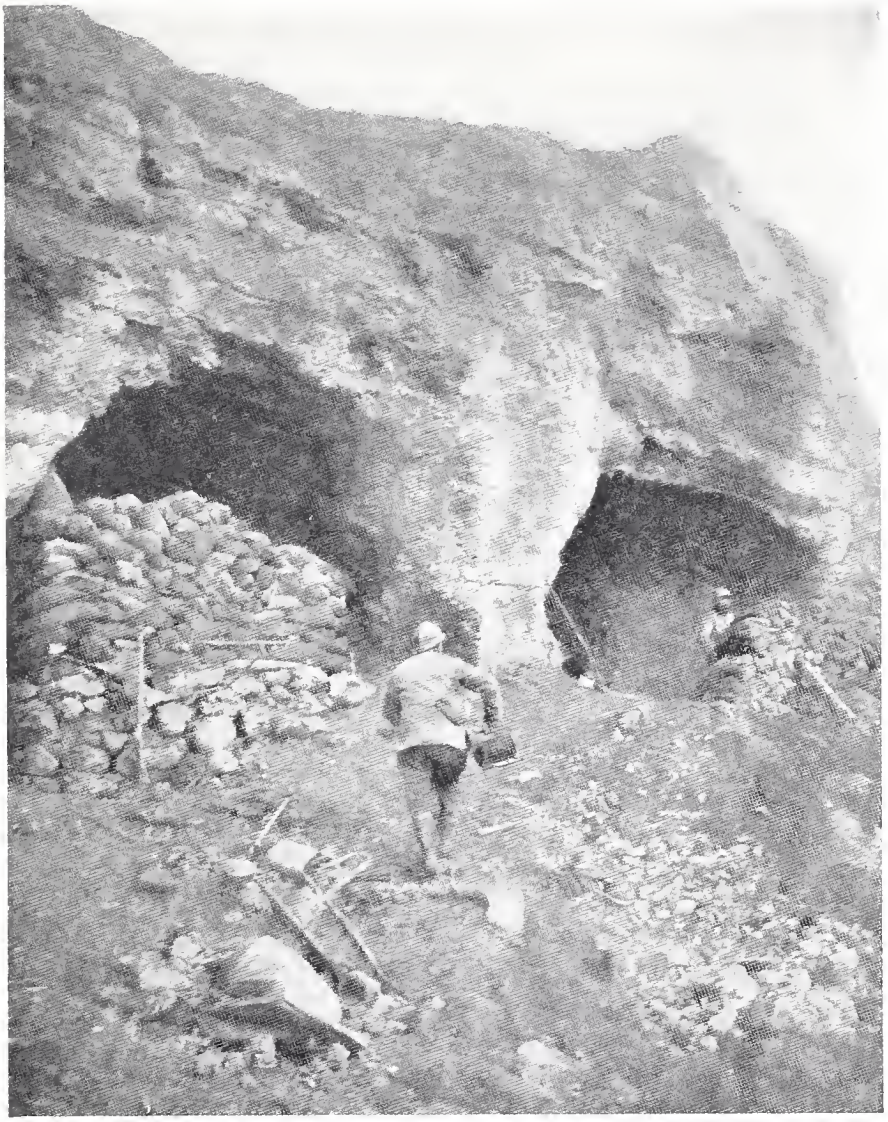
Falkenhayn could see but one possible method of arresting the British blow, or at least of delaying it. This was to hasten the fall of France, the nation which he considered, as we have seen, the "chief weapon" of England. Hence the Crown Prince received the order once again to "push forward" along the Côtes-de-Meuse. True, his troops were exhausted by the bloody attacks in which they had been engaged on Hill 304, the Mort-Homme, and at Thiaumont, but the success they had achieved at Douaumont between May 22nd and 25th must have improved their morale, re-

stored their confidence, and reawakened their hopes of victory. Moreover, they would be supplemented with stronger forces for the attacks that were now planned.

III

Struggle for Fort Vaux, and its Psychological Effect

THREE army corps were consequently hurled against our positions at Fort Vaux during the first part of June, the three being, in order from west to east, the First Bavarian Corps, the Tenth Reserve Corps, and the Fifteenth Corps. All three had a thorough acquaintance with the terrain, where they had been fighting hard for weeks and months. They succeeded, after a terrific bombardment, in gaining a foothold for several groups of assault troops on the superstructure of the fort, and these men then attacked each of our isolated resistance centers in turn. Conditions were more favorable to them than they had been to us a few days earlier at Douaumont, and thanks to the fact that our position at that point formed a salient, they were able to surround the earthwork on three sides. Within a short time our communications with the rear were irremediably endangered. To attempt to hold their position under



Yawning Casemates of the Fort of Vaux Opening on the Moat and Partially Blocked with Sand Bags

such circumstances was, on the part of our men, simply a matter of honor. Inspired by this noble ambition, Major Raynal and his heroic comrades in arms refused to yield the fort, and in recognition of their self-sacrifice, General Joffre sent them his congratulations and conferred upon their leader, as a reward, a high rank in the Legion of Honor. There can be no memory more affecting than that of their last stand, when, cut off from us with no hope of assistance, they sent us their final reports.

The following message came to us on the morning of June 4th, by carrier pigeon:

"We are still holding our position, but are being attacked by gases and smoke of very deadly character. We are in need of immediate relief. Put us into communication with Souville at once for visual signalling. We get no answer from there to our calls. This is our last pigeon!"

Then during the morning of June 5th came this message, relayed by visual signal through Souville:

"The enemy is working on the west side of the fort to construct a mine in order to blow up the vaults. Direct your artillery fire there quickly."

At eight o'clock came another:

"We do not hear your artillery. We are being attacked with gas and liquid fire. We are in desperate straits."

Then this one, at nightfall on June 5th:

"I must be set free this evening, and must have supplies of water immediately. I am coming to the end of my strength. The troops, enlisted men and officers, have done their duty to the last, in every case."

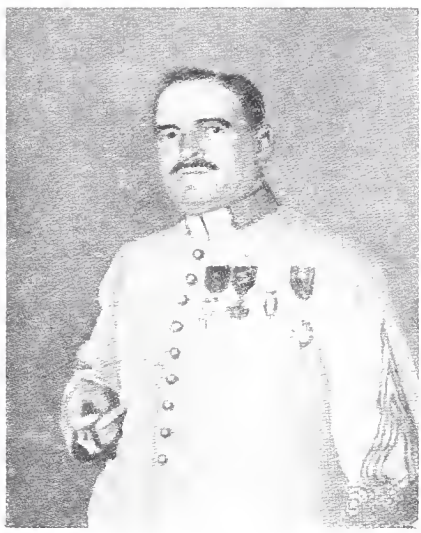
On the 6th came only these few words:

". . . you will intervene before we are completely exhausted. Vive la France!"

And finally, on June 7th, at half past three in the morning, these last words, whose meaning we could not make out:

". . . must go on."

The French High Command had never for a moment been deaf to these appeals. Counter-attacks, prepared in advance or attempted on the spur of the moment, were launched almost without interruption, but not one of them was able to break through the ring of fire that cut off the fort. As late as June 7th, when the German communiqué reporting the capture of the fort had already been issued, after Major Raynal and his soldiers had already fallen, crushed by shells, suffocated by gas, exhausted by thirst, Gen-



-- Major Raynal --

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eral Nivelle was despatching to their aid the mixed brigade commanded by Colonel Savy, "on the noblest mission that can be entrusted to French troops, that ... succoring comrades in arms who are gallantly doing their duty under tragic conditions." But it was too late! Fort Vaux had fallen, and must wait with Fort Douaumont for better days, before it could resume its place proudly within the French lines. However, the defence of Verdun was in no way endangered by this reverse, and the German Fifth Army failed to win the victory on which it had set its heart, the victory of far reaching effect, which was to extricate the Austro-Hungarians, check the Russians, or dishearten the English.

There was, however, a short period in France, during those tragic days of late May and early June, before we knew the extent of the successes won by General Cadorna and General Brussiloff, when the confidence of the nation appeared to be shaken. We had been holding the center of the stage by ourselves for too long a time, and in the rear, where patriotism had no stimulus from the excitement of battle, anxiety, weariness, and disappointment were widespread. Public opinion, tired of restraint, began to express its woes. Speeches and arguments were published in the newspapers that sowed the seeds

of public discontent, even of public pessimism.

I was disturbed by these symptoms of the most serious malady that can threaten an army; and General Joffre, also somewhat alarmed by them, brought the subject to the attention of the government in a letter that he wrote on June 2nd to the Minister of War: "This seems an ill chosen time to weaken the confidence of our fighting forces, to make them distrust their strength, to unsettle discipline, and to lessen the authority of their leaders. The men of every party who, through the newspapers, are the real dictators of public opinion, should be shown the necessity of supporting, by impassioned appeals, the courage of the soldiers and of the nation."

On June 12th the Commander-in-Chief, his hand strengthened by the successes of our allies, took up directly the question of the morale of the troops, in the following Order of the Day: "The plan elaborated by the Councils of the Allies is now in process of execution. Soldiers of Verdun, this has been made possible by your heroic courage. That was the fundamental condition of success, and our future victories are dependent on it. For by it was the situation created in the whole theater of the European War which is leading to the triumph of our cause. I appeal to you to summon all your courage, all your spirit of

sacrifice, all your zeal and your love for your country, and to hold fast until the end, checking the last attempts of the enemy, who now stands at bay."

To me personally, in response to a letter that I had written on the previous day asking him to set a date as soon as possible for the English offensive, General Joffre announced that the Franco-British action would begin almost at once, thanks to the splendid resistance at Verdun, and he added these words: "I count on your activity and your energy to transmit to all your subordinates the ardent devotion, the indomitable will to resist to the end, and the courage which animate yourself."

Thus the leader, by his words and his attitude, checked the development of the crisis which threatened the nation, and completely saved the army. I was to remember this, in 1917.

Among our adversaries, there was serious danger of a break in morale. After the failure of the Austrians on the Italian front and Brussiloff's push into Galicia, the German press began to change its tone, and to betray general anxiety, strange in a country where the expression of public opinion was suppressed. Moreover, and this was particularly serious, differences arose among the leaders, and grew more and more bitter. The prestige of Hindenburg and Luden-

dorff increased, for they had been uniformly successful on the eastern front, and they did not fail to call attention to the grave consequences of the enterprise against Verdun. They pointed out that if their advice had been followed, the forces in the east would not have been depleted in order to strengthen those in the west, and that there would now have been no need to send men back to the east, either to assist the tottering Austrian army or to threaten the Rumanians, who were being rapidly drawn into the circle of the allies of France by the successes of the Russians. Falkenhayn, in the meantime, touched on a sore spot by insisting on the importance of his victory at Verdun, while the Crown Prince made efforts to prove to him its utter fruitlessness. The latter attempted to lay the blame on the high authority of the Emperor, but he failed to make his point of view appear convincing. He wrote: "The months of battle during this period at Verdun are among my most painful memories of the whole war. I guessed, indeed I knew, what sort of situation faced us, and I had had so many personal interviews with officers and enlisted men that I could entertain no further illusions. In my inmost self I was absolutely convinced that the offensive ought not to be continued, and yet I had to carry out the orders to continue it."

IV

Battles of Thiaumont and Fleury

WE cannot deny that the German Fifth Army fulfilled in masterly fashion the duty that it still had to perform. It was constantly kept up to the strength of twenty divisions. Our Second Army at this time had in line the same number, grouped in six army corps sectors.[1] But though we had attained a situation of equality as far as the number of divisions in action was concerned, in the battles waged for Douaumont and Vaux our artillery continued markedly inferior, so much so that on June 11th I wrote to General Joffre: "We are fighting, from the point of view of artillery, in the proportion of one to two. This situation cannot go on indefinitely without endangering the security of our front." General Headquarters was hard pressed by the concentration of its available strength on the Somme, and so was economizing in

[1] i. e.: on the left bank: sectors A, Seventh Corps; B, Fifteenth Corps; and C, Thirty-first Corps; and on the right bank: sectors D, Eleventh Corps; E, Sixth Corps; and G, Second Corps.

munitions and was limiting us to a daily allowance of eleven thousand rounds, quite insufficient to stand up against the constantly increasing prodigality of shells on the part of the enemy. We were bound to suffer much on this account, and yet we had to resign ourselves, since it meant more to us than to anyone that the Franco-British offensive should meet with prompt and unequivocal success.

Our soldiers in these circumstances proved their extraordinary fortitude, a quality never before exhibited by troops in so high a degree. Then took place the glorious incident of the Trench of the Bayonets, so admirably described by Major Bouvard in his pamphlet on the *Glory of Verdun*:

"During the night of June 10th, the First and Third Battalions of the One Hundred and Thirty-seventh Infantry relieved some exhausted troops on the northern slopes of the Ravine de la Dame, north and northwest of the Tiaumont Farm. The German bombardment was proceeding with great violence, hampering reconnaissances and interfering seriously with relief. The bombardment lasted all through the day of June 11th, the shells that came over being of very large caliber, so that they churned up the ground like fermenting yeast. The losses were heavy. On the evening of June 11th the companies each mustered only seventy men, as against a

hundred and sixty-four when they came into line. Blood was all about. Around the first-aid post, red rivulets coursed into the connecting trench. Detached heads and limbs were strewn on the broken ground.

"The men left alive felt that the hour of sacrifice was about to strike. As their firearms were choked with earth and were unusable, they fixed their bayonets to their gun-barrels and waited for the hand-to-hand struggle that must follow.

"Between midnight and four o'clock in the morning the two battalions were under converging fire. A thick layer of fine dust, settling back to earth after each shell explosion, covered the ground and made footing difficult. The smoke was suffocating. It was at this time that most of the men in the Trench of the Bayonets must have been lost.

"At six o'clock the Germans issued from their trenches and attacked the French companies, now reduced to thirty men apiece and mustering not one tenth the number of their enemies. Their grenades exhausted, the French were overwhelmed, and almost every man who survived was taken prisoner. But two machine guns remained in commission, and swept the ground so that the enemy was unable to hold it and had to abandon it, leaving only a small group in the farm at Thiaumont.

"The men who on that soil went to their grim death were natives of La Vendée, magnificent soldiers, inspired by profound religious faith. Many were telling their rosaries as they fell, their hearts full of the simple

determination not to retreat one inch from the ground that had been entrusted to them to hold, because their leaders had told them that the fate of Verdun and the fate of France demanded their sacrifice."

June 23d was a specially critical day. After two days of preparation by their heavy artillery, which enjoyed a marked superiority over ours, the Germans launched an attack extending from west of the village of Douaumont to a point southeast of the fort of Vaux.

Our Sixth Corps and the right flank of our Second Corps, though they suffered severely from the avalanche of shells and gases that fell upon them, held back the advance of the enemy for several hours, but the latter soon captured the whole of the crest running from the village of Fleury to the village of Thiaumont, and then continued his advance toward the woods south of Fleury and along the crest of Froideterre southwest of Thiaumont. The situation began to grow serious, for our last position, between the fort of Saint-Michel and the fort of Souville was invested at close quarters. If we should lose it, Verdun would be uncovered, standing in the center of a vast amphitheater of which the rims would be held by the enemy. Under these conditions, our hold on the right bank would be irremediably endangered.

For this emergency the forces of the Second Army

were not sufficient, either in quantity, or, especially, in quality, for the divisions of which it was composed were too exhausted to resist with any certainty the attacks which we foresaw would continue. General Nivelle, even while he was sending urgent appeals for reënforcement, attempted to play upon all the responsive chords in the hearts of his troops by assuring them that their isolated rôle in the battle would soon cease: "This is the decisive moment. The Germans feel that they are being hunted down on all sides and are launching violent and desperate attacks against our front, in the hope of reaching the gates of Verdun before they are themselves attacked by the reunited forces of the Allied armies. Comrades, you must not let them pass."

During the evening of June 23d, I telephoned to General de Castelnau at Chantilly to inform him of the situation, to remind him of the prime importance that we attached to holding the threatened positions, and to point out to him that we could not do the job with "second class divisions." I ended the conversation with these words, repeating what I had been urging day after day: "You must hurry the English attack."

I was given satisfaction immediately as to the first point, and four fresh divisions were put at my dis-

position. From that time, beginning June 24th, General Nivelle was able not only to check the advance of the enemy, but even to embark upon a series of counter-attacks aiming to release our second line position. On the hill of Froideterre, and around the fort of Thiaumont, strenuous battles took place in which the various strong points passed from one side to the other in turn. It was like living a second time through the month of May, during which, on the left bank, our troops struggled with equal energy to save the position of resistance on Hill 304 and on the Mort-Homme.

V

Opening of the Battle of the Somme and Release of Verdun

IN regard to the English attack, I was soon given definite assurance. General Headquarters telephoned me on June 25th that the general bombardment on the Somme would begin on the 26th and their assaulting divisions would begin their advance on the 29th. I quote the words in which General Joffre, on June 26th, informed the government of the general scheme for the projected actions:

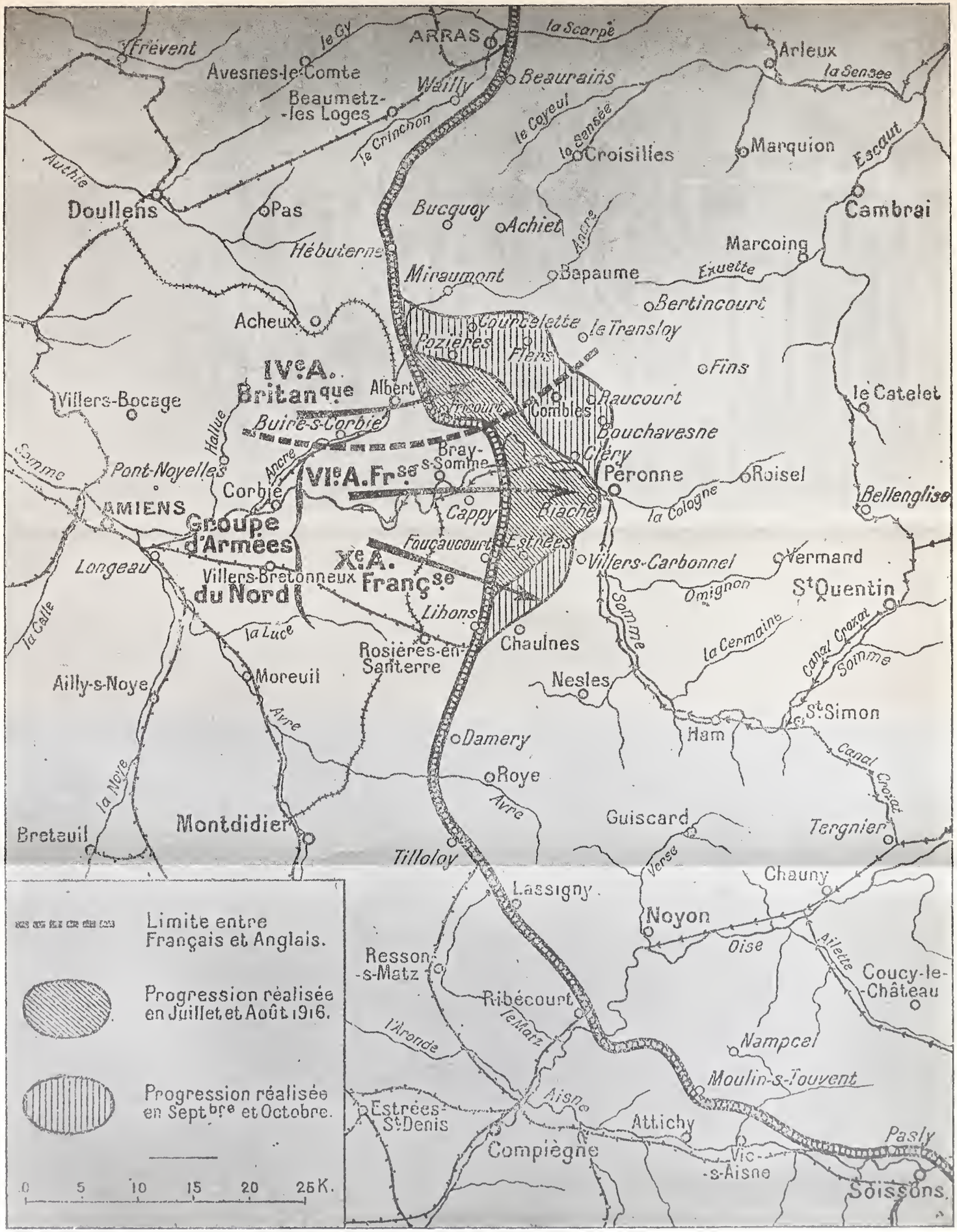
"On June 29th the British armies will attack on the north front of the Somme. The offensive, which will involve the use of about half the large units that are at present in France, that is to say, twenty-six divisions, will be launched along a front of approximately twenty-five kilometers, between Gommécourt and Maricourt.

"In order to coöperate as fully as possible in the action of the English forces, and to be in a position to take advantage with them of any widespread success, I have grouped under General Foch's orders all the large units

and all the heavy artillery at our disposition that our situation at Verdun has not forced us to employ on the Meuse. In spite of the fact that I have had to give to General Pétain, since the beginning of this battle, a total force of sixty-five divisions, the muster of French forces for the offensive on the Somme will be imposing. The attack by General Foch will extend as a matter of fact from Maricourt to Foucaucourt, along a front of about twelve kilometers. It will involve the use of fourteen divisions to begin with, will be undertaken on the same date as that of the British armies, and will be carried on in close conjunction with them.

"Thus the offensive of the Franco-British armies will be launched along a front of thirty-seven kilometers with a total force of forty divisions. Moreover, this figure may be largely increased if, as I hope, the results of the first attacks are such as to allow us to count on important successes."

The critical period of preparation for concerted action by the Allies was coming to an end under conditions favorable to us. We had had a difficult game to play, but it was almost over. The English and the French began their advance on July 1st, at half past seven in the morning, two days later than the date that had originally been fixed, because unfavorable weather conditions had hindered the preparation of the Allies for forty-eight hours. The British Fourth Army under General Rawlinson made some prog-



The Battle of the Somme, in 1916

ress, as far as Montauban, Mametz, and La Boisselle, that is to say, to a depth somewhat less than we had hoped. On the other hand, the French Sixth Army under General Fayolle went far beyond its objectives, captured in its first rush the whole first line position of the Germans, and advanced, along their second line position, to Hardecourt, Herbécourt, and Asservillers. On the following days, the Rawlinson army began to extend its gains and the Fayolle army, in the face of an enemy force surprised by the unexpected strength of the attack, occupied the whole plateau of Flaucourt, establishing its lines as far as Maisonnette and the outskirts of Barleux. This made a serious breach in the German Second Army under General von Below, and its situation became precarious.

The Imperial Chief of Staff resolved immediately to reorganize and reënforce the troops on the Somme in order to retrieve the situation, a measure which would necessitate loosening his grip on Verdun. Nevertheless a final effort was made there on June 11th. The Tenth Reserve Corps, using the Alpine corps and three additional divisions, hurled themselves against our positions at Souville, captured Fleury, and gained a temporary foothold in the fort, but were immediately driven back from there by the

French counter-attacks of Generals Mangin and Paulinier. We were given a rude shock, but it was our last. For from the evening of June 11th the Crown Prince received orders, "since it had not been possible to reach the objectives that had been defined," to keep from now on "strictly on the defensive." General von Gallwitz tendered to General von Francois the command on the left bank of the Meuse, and was transferred to the command of the German First Army, then in process of formation south of the Somme, and at the same time of the group of the German Second and First Armies, whose task was to be the checking of the Franco-British forces. Between two and three divisions and a large number of batteries of artillery were despatched in the same direction. Verdun was freed, and saved. . . .

While Falkenhayn was arranging these matters, General Nivelle informed me that he had just received from the French Academy, for the Second Army, a message of "admiration, gratitude, and respect." He sent on to me, on the evening of June 11th, the Order of the Day in which he notified his troops of the tribute:

"The army of Verdun will have no greater ground for pride than that it has earned such a testimonial from the High Assembly which personifies and immortalizes the

genius of the French language and the French people.

"The army of Verdun has had the happiness of responding to the appeal made by the nation. Thanks to the heroism with which it has held, the offensive of the Allies has already progressed by brilliant stages, and the Germans are no longer at Verdun!

"But its task is not yet finished. No Frenchman has earned the right to rest from his labors as long as a single enemy still remains on the soil of France, of Alsace, or of Lorraine. We must allow the offensive of the Allies to develop freely and to achieve definite victory; we must withstand the attacks of our implacable enemies, who, in spite of the sacrifice of half a million men, which Verdun has already cost them, have not abandoned their fruitless efforts.

"And furthermore, soldiers of the Second Army, you must not be content with resistance. By continued and incessant pressure on the enemy, you must force him to keep in line against you as many of his troops as you can hold there, until the hour strikes, as it soon will, for the general offensive.

"The past is surety for the future. You will not fail in your high mission, and you will earn still more titles to the gratitude of your country and of the Allied nations."

VI

The Balance Sheet as of July 15th

WAS the commander of the Second Army correct in his statement that the Germans had lost half a million men at Verdun? The estimate may be exaggerated, for our balance sheet of April 30th showed that, during the first two months, the losses of the enemy were apparently less than our own. The figures of our total losses then stood at six thousand, five hundred and sixty-three officers and two hundred and seventy thousand men. The Germans must have very nearly approached this number, for although they may have lost less men than we during the early stages of the battle, they certainly lost more, and thus swung the balance back, from the time that they began to launch their violent attacks against our positions on Hill 304, the Mort-Homme, and at Thiaumont, Souville, and Vaux.

Unquestionably they had used up more matériel of all kinds, if we judge by their expenditure of muni-

tions. The Crown Prince observes that this amounted to a daily average of at least ninety-three thousand shells for the right bank alone. We cannot be overestimating if we add two thirds of this number for the left bank and accept a figure of one hundred and fifty thousand rounds a day; that is, an expenditure of twenty-one million, seven hundred thousand shells for the one hundred and forty days of the battle, counting from February 21st. On our side, General Headquarters, in a communication sent by it at the time to General Janin, chief of the French Military Mission in Russia, reported that it had sent to Verdun ten million, three hundred thousand rounds for the 75's, one million, two hundred thousand rounds for the calibers between 80 and 105, eight million, six hundred thousand rounds for the calibers higher than 105; that is, twenty million, one hundred thousand shells in all, of which a great number still remained stored in the depots of the fort and of the different sectors. We must note in addition that the figure given by the Crown Prince refers in all likelihood only to the heavy and extra heavy projectiles, so that the reckless consumption of munitions by the Fifth Army must represent a much larger total than was admitted.

It is true that we had sent seventy divisions into action, compared with forty-six enemy divisions, but

I repeat that the reliefs were not carried on under the same system, and the Crown Prince admits that the method he used, contrary to his own judgment, by the way, was much the more expensive.

About July 15th the German Fifth Army still consisted of approximately twenty-five divisions. But at the time when it was beginning to thin out, in order to feed the group of armies under von Gallwitz on the Somme, our Second Army was kept up to strength, in view of the counter-thrusts that it was preparing, and it continued to include eight army corps, composed of tired units, destined to be reconstituted.[1]

Think of the greatness of our effort and the vigor of our High Command, represented by the massing of imposing offensive forces in the northern army group at a time when the Second Army was absorbing so much of our strength! Among our services the aviation deserves note as having been so efficiently developed that it had acquired the unquestioned control of the battle field after having been at first greatly inferior to the enemy. The aviation had been completely reorganized at the initiative of Colonel

[1] i. e., in all, twenty-nine divisions, ninety territorial battalions, one thousand, one hundred and six field guns, nine hundred and forty-one heavy guns, two hundred and seventeen airplanes, eighteen balloons, seven defence sections and twenty defence posts against airplanes—representing sixteen thousand, four hundred and fifty officers, six hundred and twenty-seven thousand men, and two hundred and eighteen thousand horses and mules.

Barrès, both in connection with the army corps and with the army. Observation planes of the Farman and Caudron types now guaranteed with the greatest exactness the operation of liaison with the infantry, of the photographic service, and of the timing of the artillery. They were constantly fighting the pursuit planes of the enemy, were hampered many times by unfavorable atmospheric conditions under the lowering, gloomy sky of Verdun, as they skimmed over the pockmarked and tumbled crests of the hills, and suffered heavy losses, but never failed in their mission. The Nieuport pursuit planes distinguished themselves for boldness and activity, continually attacking the enemy planes and balloons, incessantly flying over the front either in powerful patrol squadrons or in small groups, and appearing always at different hours.

A great phalanx of pilots was there! The glory of Guynemer was already in the ascendant. His gallantry has become a legend. One day he returned to the base and saw his comrades standing aghast at sight of him as he got out of his plane all covered with blood. "This is funny," he exclaimed. "I am the one who got hit, but you are the ones who look that way!" Nungesser had returned to his squadron at Verdun, having hardly recovered from a number of wounds, with

an artificial jaw bone and only one sound leg. He had to have the help of several men to get in or out of his plane, but that fact did not deter him from rushing to attack any enemy he might see. Navarre was at that time the most brilliant of all. His red plane was seen everywhere, never at rest. One day he went to Colonel Barrès at Lemme and reported that he had just shot down an enemy airplane. "What you tell me is all right," returned the Colonel, "but look at those planes flying over us at this moment." Navarre started his motor again, rose to the necessary height, fell upon the German patrol, and shot down one of the airplanes before the eyes of his leaders and his comrades. Towering above them all, dominating them by the splendid example he set, and by the nobility of his character, was Major de Rose, Chief of the Pursuit Group, the personification of Celtic chivalry, radiating intelligence and energy. Truly, as was afterwards said, Verdun was "the crucible in which the aviation of the French was fired."

VII

The French Counter-Thrusts

BEGINNING on July 15th, we assumed the offensive on the right bank of the Meuse, and General Mangin sent in the Thirty-seventh Division, put at his disposition for the purpose, with the support of four hundred pieces of artillery, to carry out an operation intended to recapture the positions around Fleury. But the local commander hurried too much the opening of this action—which did not succeed and which should have had more thorough preparation—because of the disturbance caused in the Souville sector by the final German onslaught on July 11th.

In a communication of July 18th I gave out my criticisms and comments on this matter. In future our attacks were to be organized by the commanders themselves of the groups, for they were best fitted to give the infantry its bearings and to allot it the necessary support, by reason of their knowledge of the terrain and of the numbers of the forces that they had

at their permanent disposition. They should make it their special concern that the artillery be put to more efficient use in the designation of objectives, in the regulation of fire, and in the liaison with the assault troops. Thus I returned to the all-important question of the superiority that we must attempt to establish for our artillery, with the determination to succeed at last in solving it. This had been my chief preoccupation from the beginning of the battle, and only on this condition could we achieve success in the end. Moreover, I asked General Headquarters to assign to the Second Army two mortars of 400 caliber, which I felt sure were indispensable for the crushing operations that must be carried out against the forts of Douaumont and Vaux before we could hope to recapture these works. I was promised satisfaction on this point as soon as the autumn should set in, and I decided to wait until that time for our important counter-thrusts. Thus the months of August and September passed without any outstanding incidents in the Verdun region. Bitter struggles continued to take place, however, on the heights of Froideterre, around the earthwork of Thiaumont, and near Fleury, which was taken by our Moroccan Colonial Regiment on August 18th, in an action carried out with great speed, brilliant in every detail.

We purposely kept up our offensive activities while we were waiting to begin more important operations in order to prevent the enemy from having free play for his reserves between Verdun and the Somme, as well as between his eastern and western fronts. The result was that the situation of our opponents, so far as their morale was concerned, grew rapidly worse, not only in public opinion, which reluctantly resigned itself to see Germany thwarted in all her undertakings, but also in the High Command, in the inner circle of which open dissension broke out. On August 21st the Crown Prince dismissed his Chief of Staff, General von Knobelsdorf, whom he had always suspected of encouraging behind the back of his chief the stubborn opinions of General Falkenhayn. The latter's star, moreover, was now setting, for too many heavy responsibilities lay on his shoulders: the check at Verdun, the unfortunate Austrian undertaking against the Italian front, the disastrous revival of Russian activity, the appearance in line of the British beside the French along the Somme, the using up of German effectives, the resulting moral depression in the Central Empires, and, to crown it all, during these last days in August, the declaration of war against Germany by Italy and that against Austria-Hungary by Rumania. On August 28th, Marshal Hindenburg

was appointed Chief of the General Staff with General Ludendorff as his Quartermaster General. The two newly installed leaders wished to concentrate in their own hands the whole direction of the war for the Quadruple Alliance, but they could achieve this end only step by step at the cost of many clashes with the Emperor's Military Cabinet, the Chancellor, the Ministers of War in the different states of the German Federation, and the High Command of the Austro-Hungarian army.

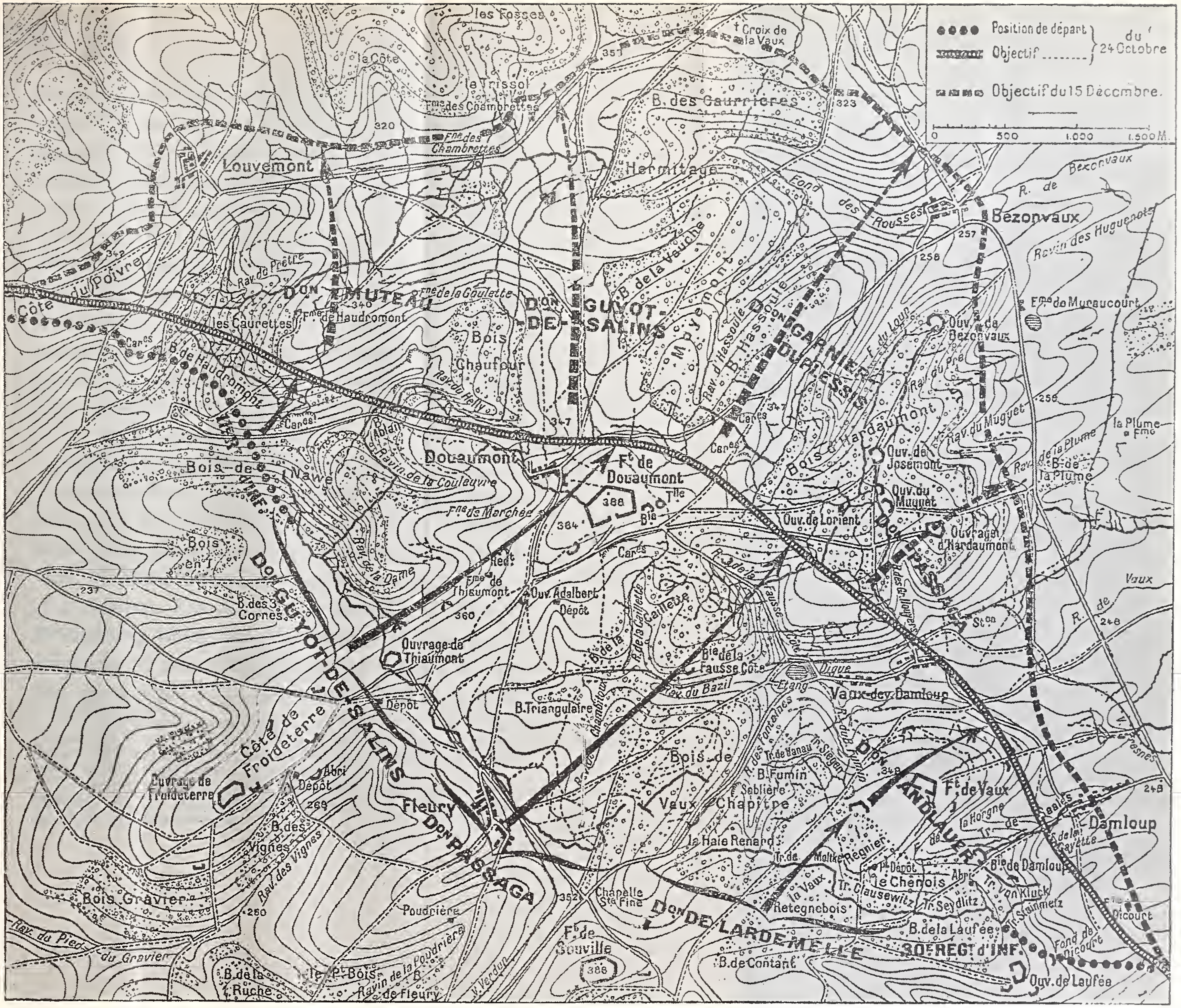
During their first visit to the western front, at the beginning of the month of September, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were surprised, not to say dismayed, to find among the men of all ranks a mental attitude so different from that prevailing on the eastern front. In the east, in spite of the temporary strain caused by the retreat of the Austrians in Galicia, the general atmosphere was one of victory and of activity, and every man's mind was full of the splendid successes already won, or anticipated. In the west, on the other hand, the leaders appeared depressed and spiritless; their faith was undermined by discouragement; they were talking of a possible end of the war without profit to Germany. The troops appeared cruelly weary and worn. Ludendorff wrote shortly afterwards: "Verdun was becoming a bleeding wound, from

which flowed the life blood of our forces. The rational thing would have been to withdraw our positions entirely behind the devastated zone. As to the Somme, we were there greatly inferior in every respect to the English and the French." The men at the top turned their attention to improving the morale all along the line. They reorganized the command so as to regroup the armies in logical order according to the operations undertaken, and they attempted for this one time to bolster up the prestige of the princes of the blood royal, in order to show their own devotion to the interests of the dynasty. Thus the Imperial Crown Prince was to take command of the southern group of armies, that chiefly affected by the battle of Verdun; in the west, the Crown Prince of Bavaria was to be at the head of the group of armies used in, or liable to be sent into, the battle of the Somme; the Duke of Würtemburg in the north was to remain at the head of the Fourth Army, and was to be directly responsible to the war chiefs.

The vigorous measures of the new chiefs, however, did not succeed in clearing the skies speedily, and the situation continued extremely tense for the Central Empires, who were, in Ludendorff's phrase, "balanced on a knife-edge." The Italians were attacking in force on the Isonzo; the Russo-Rumanian armies

had crossed the borders of Moldavia and Wallachia and were threatening Hungary; in Macedonia, General Sarrail was pushing his forces against Florina and Monastir; on the Somme, the French Sixth Army, under General Fayolle, and the French Tenth Army, which extended it to the south, were developing their success under the orders of General Foch and at the end of September were in process of capturing from the Germans the formidable positions of Combles, Deniécourt, and Vermandovillers, while the English were advancing to Morval, Lesboeufs, and Thiepval.

At Verdun our hour was about to strike. General Nivelle and I had agreed at the beginning of October to proceed to the recapture of the forts in order to restore the Citadel to its pristine strength. General Mangin, assigned to the command of the sectors on the right bank, was directing the operation, and actuated by such a leader as he, whose vigor was a byword in the French army, we counted on a signal success. General Headquarters had sent the two mortars of 400 caliber that I had asked for, and these, in addition to several pieces of 370 caliber which we already had, allowed us to keep up a powerful crushing fire on the earthworks. The artillery at our disposition for the attack would amount in all to three hundred field guns and three hundred heavy pieces,



-- The Lines of Departure and the Objectives of the French Divisions on the 24th of October and 15th of December, 1916 --

the smallest number with which we could expect to subdue the two hundred batteries, amounting to eight hundred pieces, located by the Second Army in the involved German sectors on the right bank. The assault was to be launched with a first line force of three divisions,[1] which three second line divisions would be prepared to support. That is to say, we would have the same number of major units as the Germans could use against us.[2] We were not superior in material strength, but we undoubtedly were in morale and also in training, for the officers and common soldiers alike had followed a thorough course in preparation for the attack.

During the days between October 20th and October 23d, our artillery and our aviation established superiority on the battle field, against enemy batteries which were still present in great numbers but which were doubtless forced to exercise severe economy in munitions. The German publication of Werner Beumelburg which has just appeared at Oldenburg enlightens us as to what damage we inflicted on the men who occupied Fort Douaumont. Five shots from

[1] The Thirty-eighth, under General Guyot de Salins, against Fort Douaumont; the One Hundred and Thirty-third, under General Passaga, opposite the gap between Douaumont and Vaux; the Seventy-fourth under General Lardemelle, against Fort Vaux.

[2] In the first line, the Thirty-fourth, the Fifty-fourth, and the Ninth Divisions, and the Thirty-third Reserve Division; in the second line, the Tenth and Fifth Divisions.

our 400 caliber mortars during the day of October 23d caused real disasters, demolishing in turn the sick bay and four of the most important casemates of the second story. That evening other explosions destroyed the pioneer post, set fire to a depot of fuses and ammunition for machine guns, and made most of the galleries uninhabitable by filling them with thick, suffocating smoke. Having no water to check the conflagration, the Germans threw on the flames bottles of charged water intended for the use of the wounded, which were thus wasted to no purpose. On the 24th, between five and seven o'clock in the morning, the garrison withdrew from the fort, leaving in it only a group of about thirty men commanded by Captain Prollius. One cannot say that the garrison "abandoned its post," by this act, for the command gave its approval to the manœuver, and yet we have the right, it seems, to contrast in our minds this attitude with that of the little group of soldiers under Major Raynal who held Fort Vaux to the end of their strength at the risk of being buried alive in it by the explosion for which they heard the subterranean preparations.

Our three divisions advanced to the attack, starting at half past eleven in the morning, favored by a thick fog, which concealed their approach, but which also entirely prevented all observation by the aviators and

The Poilus of Verdun

They Retook Douaumont

liaison between the infantry and artillery. Fortunately, the latter had timed its work perfectly. The barrages preceding the assaulting troops succeeded each other with mathematical regularity, and our excellent infantry reached the crest of Fort Douaumont immediately after the last heavy shells. General Passaga's division in the front rank established firm hold along the line running from the eastern turret of Fort Douaumont to a point north of the village of Vaux. The division of Guyot de Salins, which was delayed for a short time by the fog in the chaos of the Wood of la Caillette and the approaches to the fortifications, soon appeared on its left; rushed the battalions of the Moroccan Colonial Regiment, which were under the command of Croll and Nicolai into the moats, galleries, and casemates; captured the detachment under Prollius; and occupied the recaptured fort. The division on the right failed to enter Fort Vaux that day, for it had suffered rather heavy losses in the course of its advance, but it was relieved on the following days by a fresh division,[1] which in its turn, on November 2nd, entered these works—also evacuated by the Germans.

Germany bore up bravely under the crushing blows dealt her at Verdun and on the Somme. Her military

[1] The Ninth Division, under General Andlauer.

leaders, who had made their reputations on the eastern front, determined to keep on the defensive against us, and to let the Austrians withstand the Italians in their attack on the Isonzo. They were not perturbed by the loss of Monastir on the northern Saloniki front in November; and they sent all the forces at their disposition against the Russo-Rumanian combination in order to settle the fate of our new allies. In a lightning campaign in which Mackensen and Falkenhayn distinguished themselves, the German armies crossed the Carpathians and the Danube, spread out over the plains, and entered Bucharest on December 6th.

It cannot be denied that this was a brilliant success, but it altered very little the aspect of things in general, as the Chief Quartermaster General himself had to admit later: "We had defeated the Rumanian army, but we were unable to destroy it. In spite of this victory, we came out weaker in the end, as far as the general conduct of the war was concerned." However, the Central Empires wished to obtain some definite advantage from these events, and that is the reason why, on December 12th, trusting that President Wilson would come in as mediator, they announced that they would hold preliminary conferences with a view to negotiating peace.

Our answer was the new offensive at Verdun on December 15th. Obviously we could not accept the idea of the proposed negotiations when Rumania, with magnanimity and courage, had just sacrificed herself utterly for the cause of the Allies. On that day General Mangin, in conformity with instructions from me and from General Nivelle prescribing the recapture of the positions covering the line of forts, sent forward four divisions [1] north of Douaumont, supported by four second-line divisions and by seven hundred and forty heavy guns. This time we had numerical superiority over the four or five divisions which were all the German Fifth Army could muster to oppose us in the sector of attack, and our artillery dominated the situation even more effectively than on October 24th. Thus we captured without difficulty and almost without loss the whole cover-zone for the forts from Vacherauville as far as Louvemont and Bezonvaux, passing through the Wood of les Caurières. General Mangin, when he congratulated his troops, gave them to understand that they had just made the best possible answer to Germany's proposals for peace:

[1] The One Hundred and Twenty-sixth, under General Muteau; the Thirty-eighth, under General Guyot de Salins; the Thirty-seventh, under General Garnier-Duplessis; and the One Hundred and Thirty-third, under General Passaga.

"Our forefathers of the Revolution refused to treat with the enemy as long as he defiled by his presence the consecrated soil of France, as long as he was not forced back behind our natural boundaries, and as long as the triumph of justice and liberty was not assured. Through the muzzles of your guns and on the points of your bayonets, France has given her answer. You have acted as the embassadors of the French Republic. The French Republic thanks you."

This was the end of the battle of Verdun in 1916. It moved the Imperial Crown Prince in after days to make the pathetic confession: "For the first time I knew what it meant to lose a battle. Self-distrust, bitterness, unjust criticism of other men, contended in my heart and weighed heavily on my spirits. I recognize frankly that it took me some time to regain any solid conviction." And from Ludendorff came the statement, truly mournful after the exaltation of his success against Rumania: "The blow that fell upon us was particularly severe. We had had too much to bear during the course of that year. On the western front, we were completely exhausted."

Later I had the great satisfaction of presiding, as Commander-in-Chief of the French armies, over the offensive action that completed the liberation of Verdun, when, on August 20th, 1917, under the orders of General Guillaumat, our troops reëstablished prac-

tically in their entirety the positions that we occupied before February 21st, 1916, as well on the right as on the left bank of the Meuse. Then came the action of September 12th, 1918, which was so brilliantly conducted by the American First Army, under General Pershing, and which reduced the famous salient of Saint-Mihiel and liberated the eastern flank of the fortified region. Finally Verdun, our noble Citadel, preserved inviolate, was the point from which the Franco-American armies took off, when side by side they made their dash to victory, between the end of September and the 11th of November, 1918.

VIII

The Soldier of Verdun

ON September 19th, 1927, a devout crowd of pilgrims thronged to the official dedication of the Ossuary of Douaumont, in which were interred the consecrated remains of many of the heroes fallen on the field of battle.

On that day, deeply moved by my memories, my mind's eye full of the splendid and honored vision of the soldiers whom I had commanded, I made an attempt to call back to remembrance their suffering and their valor. Let me quote a few of the words that then rose to my lips, for I can think of no more suitable end for this narrative:

"Every man of you should be mentioned by name, soldiers of Verdun, soldiers in the line and soldiers in the rear. For if I give the place of honor, as is meet, to those who fell in the front of the battle, still I know that their courage would have availed nothing without the patient toil, continued day and night, to the last limit of their strength, on the part of the men to whose efforts

~ General Pétain in His Railroad Car Near the Front, Which Was His Home in 1915 ~

were due the regular arrival of the reënforcements, of munitions, and of food, and the evacuation of the wounded: the truck drivers along the Sacred Way, the railroad engineers, the ambulance force.

"Of what steel was forged the soldier of Verdun, the man whom France found ready in her need to meet the grave crisis that confronted her, the man who could calmly face the most severe of trials? Had he received some special grace which raised him instinctively to the heights of heroism?

"We who knew him can answer that he was but a man after all, with human virtues and human weaknesses. One of our own people, a man whose thoughts and affections still clung, after eighteen months of warfare, to his family, to his workshop, to his village, or to the farm on which he had been brought up.

"These same personal bonds, which taken altogether constituted his devotion to his country, laid him under obligation to protect those people and those things which in his eyes made life worth living. They inspired him to the complete sacrifice of himself. Other sentiments as well contributed to his state of mind—love of the soil, in the peasant who gave his life as a matter of course in defence of his ancestral field; devout submission to the decree of Providence in the heart of the true believer; the impulse to defend an ideal of civilization in the intellectual.

"But the noblest feelings do not suffice to instil in men the ability to fight. This is something that comes only little by little, with a knowledge of what one goes through on a battle field, and with experience in all the

conditions of warfare. We must bear in mind that the war, already an old story, had in 1916 moulded our French everyday citizen and had made of him a soldier in the fullest sense of the word.

"The suffering that he had already borne steeled him against emotion, and gave him extraordinary powers of endurance. The prospect of death, which he continually faced, filled him with a resignation that bordered on fatalism. Long practice in fighting had taught him that success is to the most tenacious, and had developed in him qualities of patience and persistence. He had also learned that in a battle each man is one link in a chain that is forged of all, and he had sacrificed his individualistic ways and class prejudices, thus cementing the splendid spirit of comradeship that made our fighting men work as one.

"An experienced and tired soldier, believing in himself and in his comrades, proud of his renown, he went up into the line certainly without enthusiasm but also without hesitation. Feeling that he carried the burden of his country's need, more important than his own, he did his duty to the very limit of his powers.

"It is impossible to believe that the soldier could have risen to such heights of heroism if he had not felt behind him the inspiration of the whole nation. Our country as a whole took up the struggle and accepted all its consequences, material and moral. It was only because the soldier had the spirit of the nation behind him to drive him on that he won the battle. It was his country's will that he fulfilled."

— M. Poincaré, President of the Republic, Decorating Major Nicolaï, a Battalion Commander, Who was First to Enter the Fort of Douaumont, the 24th of October, 1916 —

APPENDIX

Part Played by the Forts during the Battle of Verdun

THE forts of the Verdun stronghold were of great assistance to our troops during the battle, and contributed largely to our success. This fact is little known and must be emphasized in order to correct erroneous opinions that have become widespread concerning the value of permanent fortifications.

In the course of the year 1915 such fortifications had fallen into utter disrepute. Both in France and abroad fortresses had been incapable of resisting the German high-powered artillery. Liége had fallen in twelve days, Namur in as few as six, Maubeuge and Antwerp in thirteen. In Russia, Novo-Georgievsk and Kovno had held out only about twelve days. The fastness of Przemyl alone had resisted the Russians for four months, but it had capitulated after four days of bombardment by the 305's and 420's of the Austro-Germans.

Thus it seemed as if the idea of permanent fortification were definitely doomed. It was believed that

forts, too conspicuous as targets, were destined to immediate destruction, and that only fieldworks, being less susceptible to attack by artillery, could offer to troops effective means of resisting the enemy's onslaughts.

This conviction had become so deeply rooted that when our battalions withdrew before the German advance of February 25th, 1916, they retreated on both sides of the fort of Douaumont, leaving it high and dry without a garrison. They thought of it as a shell-trap from which they would do well to stay away. But some days later, when the enemy's progress had been checked and the terrible deadlocked struggle, which was to last for many months, had begun, the forts showed what advantages they might afford to fighting troops. The men found that the shelter of the obstructing walls gave them safer and more comfortable observation posts than they could enjoy in fieldworks. As the battle dragged on, the forts, in spite of their imperfections, demonstrated that they were indisputably superior to every other system of defence. They came out of the test at Verdun completely rehabilitated.

Let us consider why the forts at Verdun made a different showing from those at other fortified places in France and abroad. At Maubeuge the Germans

were confronted by old works, dating from before the invention of the high-explosive shell. At Liége, Namur, and Antwerp guns of high caliber had had no difficulty in crumbling fortifications built to withstand only 15 and 21 centimeter shells. During the summer of 1915 in Russia most of the fastnesses had been abandoned when they were first attacked. Novo-Georgievsk, whose works were in condition to defy the fire of the German artillery, surrendered for lack of fighting spirit on the part of the garrison. Moreover, all these forts had been without liaison with any army. Warfare in modern times implies such immense consumption of munitions and of matériel of every kind and such attrition of the troops that the defence of an isolated fort, or even of a fortified place encircled with works, is speedily paralyzed.

At Verdun in 1916 the situation was entirely different. The fastness was not completely invested but remained in comparatively easy communication with the rear. The forts on the north, from Bois-Bourrus to Moulainville, were included in the army's position of resistance and constituted its framework. And finally, the troops who carried on the defence were of incomparable quality. Here we have a set of conditions that favor an estimate of the advantages afforded to troops by permanent fortifications.

Before 1870 there was nothing at Verdun but the Citadel itself and the Vauban circle of defences. Between 1874 and 1880 the first belt of detached forts was constructed, including in the northern sector, which was the scene of the battle of 1916, Belleville, Saint-Michel, and Tavannes. After 1880 the line of external forts was established, with Douaumont, Vaux, and Moulainville on the right bank and Bois-Bourrus on the left. When the exploding projectile came into use all these fortifications had to be reënforced with concrete. The work involved was accomplished on the forts of the external line between 1880 and 1897. Tavannes and Souville on the internal line were also provided with concrete shelters. Moreover, intermediate works, gradually strengthened, were constructed at Froideterre, Thiaumont, La Laufée, and Charny; and armored batteries were installed in them.

After 1889 and until 1914 further improvements were made in the organization for defence. The vaults of the works were strengthened with reënforced concrete; armored turrets and observation posts were built; subterranean shelters and storage depots for munitions were arranged for, behind the line of defence; new works, as Vacherauville, were added to the system of defence. Thus up to the eve of

the war the fortifications of Verdun were continually improved and expanded.

The armament was kept up to the standard of the fortifications. In 1914 the works on the northern front of the fastness included five turrets for disappearing guns of 155 caliber, intended for long-range action; seven turrets for disappearing guns of 75 caliber—in all, fourteen guns; twelve machine gun turrets; nine casemates of the Bourges type, containing eighteen guns, or two apiece, for flanking fire on the intervening spaces; and twenty-three armored observation posts.

However, the organization thus given to the place in time of peace was not to play a part in the battle of 1916. By that time it had been shorn of much of its strength. A decree was issued on August 5th, 1915, which practically dismantled the fortified places of our northeastern system and put their resources at the disposition of the various armies—in particular, their heavy artillery. As a result of that decree, the works of Verdun were stripped of most of their means of defence. The flanking casemates and the counterscarp trenches were dismantled; the disappearing guns taken out of the turrets; the munitions and supplies put to use outside the forts; and the garrisons withdrawn. Preparations were made for the blowing up

of the chief elements of the forts themselves, so that if the defending forces were obliged to retreat, the enemy might derive no advantage from the capture of the permanent fortifications. And, on February 24th, in view of the rapid advance of the Germans, the order was issued to load the mine chambers.

It was only when Fort Douaumont had been captured by the enemy on the 25th, in the circumstances already described, and when our command had changed hands, that the attention of the troops was drawn to the "outstanding defensive value of the forts and works of the former stronghold of Verdun." The preparations for demolition were countermanded, but before this could be put into effect, several mines had already been sprung, and had done more damage to the fortifications than any they suffered at the enemy's hands in the course of the battle.

On March 12th the Army commander gave instructions that the works should be reconditioned. He expressed himself as follows:

"Our experience in recent warfare has given us an opportunity to realize the resistance-value of the forts. They are indeed better organized than hastily constructed strong points on the field of battle, for their sites and plans have been laid out at leisure, the flanking angles carefully calculated, the shelters deeply dug and

reënforced with concrete. The forts can and should be used in every case in the defence of the various sectors.

"The guns will therefore be replaced in the casemates, the turrets repaired, the gun-chambers cleaned of all explosives that have been carried into them in order to destroy them, and requests will be forwarded to the Army for the immediate return of the specially trained force of men and the matériel which the forts now lack."

This order could be only partially carried out because of the violence of the bombardment. In particular the works of Vaux and Thiaumont were unable to make good the loss of their guns of 115 caliber for flanking fire. The lack of them was severely felt during the fighting which our troops had to do at La Caillette and the ravine of Vaux. Machine guns, which had neither their range nor their effectiveness, were substituted for them.

The untimely measures put into effect before the battle and the unfortunate incidents that took place at its beginning thus resulted in weakening our system of defence and in depriving it of much of its fighting power. Most important, the masterpiece of the system, the fort of Douaumont, passed out of our possession. The only completely organized set of fortifications presenting a solid line of defence was from that time on situated farther back. Its outstanding features were Froideterre, Souville, Tavannes, and

Moulainville. The works of Vaux, Thiaumont, and La Laufée were no longer of any use except as isolated strong points.

Even in their imperfect condition, however, the fortifications of Verdun rendered invaluable service. In the first place, they afforded shelter in which reserves could be protected from suffering premature losses and in which munitions and food supplies could be stored within reach of the fighting troops. They gave us a means of installing command posts, observation posts, and signal instruments; in a word, of organizing the battle.

The energies of the defending troops were centered on the works, for the essential nature of a fortified strong point is that it enlists the honor of the defenders in its behalf. There is no need to cite again the heroic resistance of Fort Vaux and the stubborn conflicts about the works of Thiaumont, so many times captured and recaptured.

On June 23d, 1916, after such formidable artillery preparation that he foresaw no possibility of further resistance, the enemy attacked with nineteen regiments on a six kilometer front in the direction of Souville and Froideterre. After having first occupied the ruins of Thiaumont, he advanced across the demolished French trenches against the works of Froi-

deterre. The superstructure of this fortification was in ruins and fire had broken out in it. It appeared as if the assault troops, once having reached the foot of the glacis, would have nothing more to do than walk in. But at that moment the 75 turret opened fire on them with shrapnel. The Germans who had entered the enclosure of the fort were checked by a machine gun that had been brought out of the shelters. A little later the machine gun turret, which had been temporarily silenced, opened fire in its turn. The fort as a whole lent the active support of its fire to a French counter-attack, which debouched and drove back the enemy some distance from its site.

On July 11th the Germans made another attempt. Thirteen regiments with considerable supporting artillery attacked in the direction of Souville, Saint-Michel, and Froideterre, as on June 23d. A few units reached the neighborhood of Souville, but the defenders sallied from the fort and the assault failed.

Froideterre, Souville, and La Laufée—three fortified hillocks never captured throughout the course of those desperate struggles, stood out on that chaotic battle field as immovable obstacles to which the defence could cling.

Thus the permanent fortifications played their part. They were always there, ready to make them-

selves felt, when everything else had been swept away. That is their peculiar nature, and at Verdun they demonstrated it in startling fashion. Their outer shells lasted in spite of the incredible amount of high explosive used up in the attempt to destroy them. Our concrete walls were eight and a half feet thick, whereas in other countries they were sometimes not as much as six and a half. Ours contained much more cement—eight hundred and fifty pounds to a cubic yard as compared with five hundred and fifty elsewhere in Europe; and they had been cast with extreme care. Hence their superiority.

At the lowest estimate, one hundred and twenty thousand shells fell on Douaumont. At least two thousand of these were of 270 caliber or larger. The southern face of the casemates, of masonry construction, was demolished by our artillery, but was the only part of the work to be destroyed. The subterranean portions received no damage whatever.

Vaux, as it passed into the possession of each side in turn, was subjected to alternate bombardments, with shells of the highest calibers in quantities difficult to estimate. Its chambers were undamaged.

Vacherauville was hit by more than eight thousand shells, of which one hundred and ten were of 420 caliber; Moulainville also by more than eight thou-

sand shells, of which three hundred and thirty were 420's. Froideterre, Souville, and Tavannes were each hit by between thirty and forty thousand shells, including some 420's. Their concrete shelters were unaffected.

The portions of the structure used for active combat showed the same power of resistance. Some of the casemates of the Bourges type, to be sure, never opened fire, but it was because they had been previously dismantled and a new armament could not be supplied to them. But the turrets were able to take part in the actions. They were of thicker and better tempered steel than turrets of forts in other places.

The 155 turret of Douaumont, although hit by two French shells of 400 caliber, was so little damaged that when the fort was recaptured, in October, 1916, nothing was needed to put it back into condition except cleaning and greasing. This turret gave the signal for the French attack on December 15th, 1916. While in action it was hit by a shell of 280 caliber, which did not interrupt its fire.

From the 155 turret of Moulainville nearly six thousand shells were fired upon the enemy, between February and September. Nearly twelve thousand were fired from the 75 turret. The Germans made frantic efforts to destroy these turrets with high ex-

plosive shells, and they succeeded three times in breaking the arches of the guard shell and the concrete base of the 155 turret. After a few days, it was again in operation.

The two 155 turrets of Vacherauville fired nearly one thousand shells on February 24th and 25th, 1916. On December 15th, 1916, although attacked by 305's and 210's, they fired three hundred and fifty shells. The 75 turret was put out of action only once, for a short time.

The 75 turret of La Laufée, although subjected to terrific bombardments, fired nearly two thousand shells without any interruption in its operation.

Such results as these speak volumes for the ability of our engineer officers. Technical skill comparable to theirs was achieved nowhere outside of France. And General Descourtis, in command of the engineers of the Eleventh Army, found reason after the battle to draw the following conclusions:

"The war demonstrated that the portions of our forts adapted to active combat, and the most important defensive elements, defied the most powerful artillery. Except for the small works of Thiaumont, all the forts of Verdun are still, at this date, ready for action. Concrete, which may have proved unsatisfactory abroad, and which has been too hastily condemned as useless, has

given good service in our case. The Germans tried in vain to blow it to fragments with projectiles whose weight and explosive force was far beyond anything our artillerymen and our engineers could have imagined, but they achieved only the destruction of local and limited areas. The construction of the shell-proof chambers of our forts was so well conceived, worked out with so much care, and left so much margin for unexpected developments, that as a whole these parts withstood triumphantly the most formidable attacks of the enemy.

"As to the armored turrets, the heaviest enemy projectiles were unable to destroy any but a small number of machine gun turrets, which made no claim to resist any but the light artillery. All our 155 turrets are in good condition, and the only 75 turret which was destroyed fell victim to the explosion of a charge that we ourselves had carried inside.

"Our permanent fortifications, much discussed in times of peace and utterly condemned at the beginning of the war, have amply demonstrated their value throughout the most violent attacks that any war has yet seen."

These statements cause us some regrets. If from the beginning we had trusted the skill of our military engineers the struggle at Verdun would have run a different course. If the fort of Douaumont had been occupied as it should have been it would not have been captured. Rising high above the battle field,

provided with bomb-proof shelters and with armored observation posts from which powerful flanking fire could be directed, well covered, besides, by field troops, it would have discouraged the German efforts in their opening stages.

But however that may be, the part played by our fortifications in our success was important.

The defensive organizations of every kind that were put into effect at Verdun between 1874 and 1914, including the guns and the munitions that were in the forts, cost about seventy-eight million pre-war francs. It has been pointed out that this sum does not represent even the cost of one armored cruiser. That money was well invested.

From the end of 1916, when we were once more in possession of the complete defensive system as it had been created in time of peace, a considerable amount of work was done to bring each fortified unit up to the standard then understood to be necessary. The combat elements of each, constructed before the war, were entirely reconditioned. Casemates were built outside the forts, at distances varying from two hundred and twenty to four hundred and forty yards, and were connected with them by subterranean pas-

sages. In order to facilitate access to the forts themselves, which would be constantly under bombardment, deep galleries were dug, with their entrances far in the rear, allowing supply and evacuation services to go on under any conditions.

The necessity of combating poisonous gases obliged us moreover to make complicated arrangements for keeping the chambers airtight and assuring their ventilation. Electric devices were installed to keep ventilators in motion and to furnish light. And finally, as it had been proved that the garrisons, during their stay in the forts, suffered greatly from the vibration caused by the explosion of shells of very large calibers, subterranean chambers were excavated under the foundations, in which the men could find the peace and quiet necessary to rest their nerves. Cot-beds, washing appliances, kitchens, and toilets were installed in order to insure a minimum of comfort.

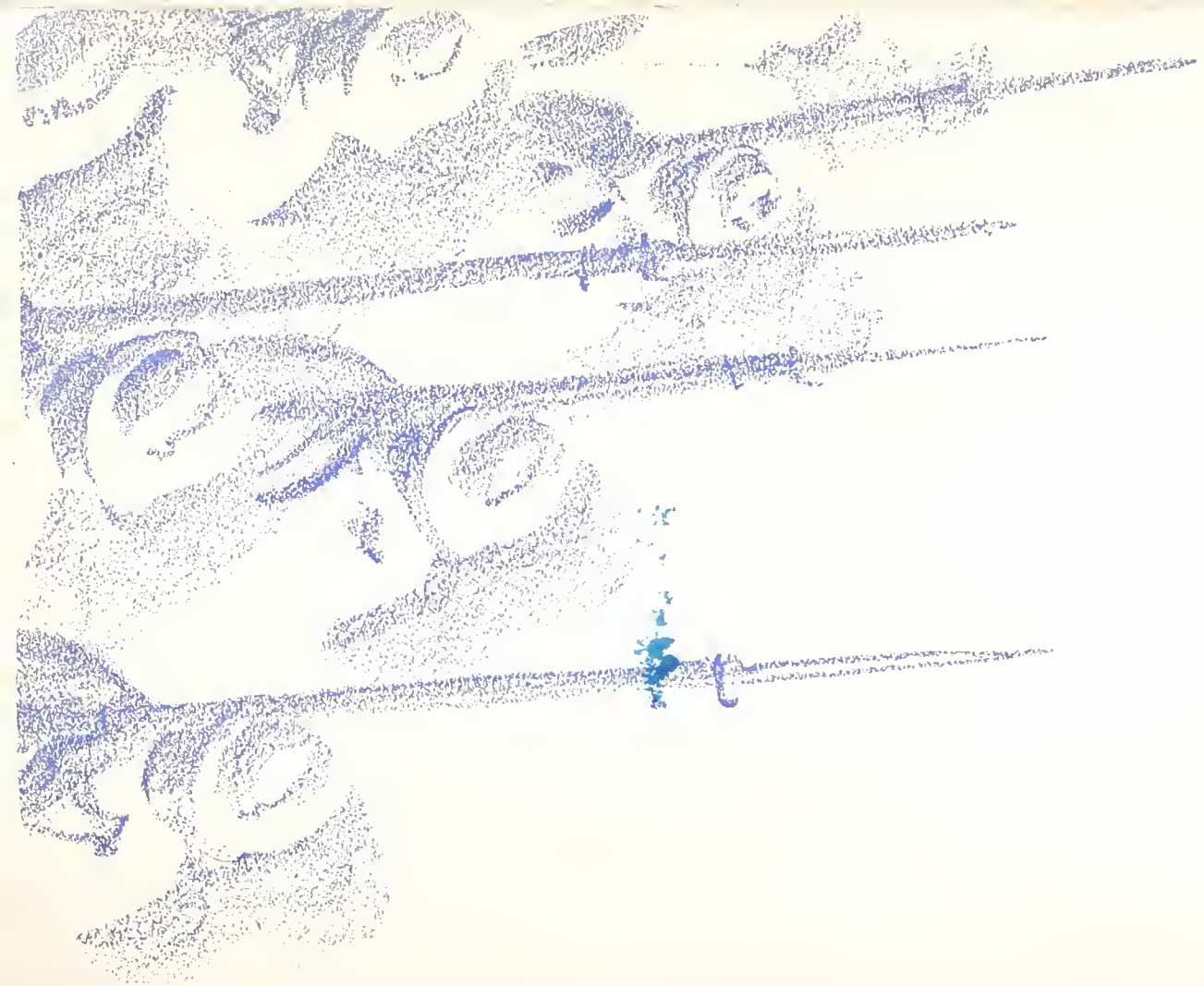
The extent of these improvements showed how much importance the combatants attached to permanent fortifications. In the spring of 1918, when the German offensives gave rise to some alarm lest there be another attempt on Verdun, the general who was then in command of the Eleventh Army made

haste to bring the stores of munitions in the works up to full allowance, in order to insure a resistance over a protracted period. "Under the present circumstances," he said in his orders, "the forts, in case of an enemy attack, will be called upon to play a most important part." This was a renewal of the instructions given during the first days of March, 1916, when the resistance at Verdun was being organized. Our experience, far from having weakened our confidence in the forts, had on the contrary strengthened it.

General Normand has written as follows: "Verdun provides the most valuable lesson of the war in the history of permanent fortifications. The question has been raised as to whether concrete or the army really won the battle, and the Mort-Homme position, which resisted as strongly as the positions fortified before the war, has been cited in this connection. The army unquestionably won the battle, but concrete contributed its share." There could be no better statement of the case. A fortification alone is not enough to check the enemy, but it greatly increases the resisting strength of troops who know how to use it.

As to the forms taken by fortifications, they must

be adapted to the increasing power of destructive weapons. The perpetual struggle still goes on between the armor and the gun, the skill of the engineer and that of the artilleryman.



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